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Operation Sindoor: Indian Media's Black Propaganda and Fake News Tactics and Their Impact on Public and International Perceptions in the 2025 India-Pakistan Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Indian media disinformation shaped public and international perceptions during the 2025 India–Pakistan conflict, known as Operation Sindoor. The analysis is limited to 31 verified misinformation cases detailed in the *Fake News Watchdog Incident Report 2025*. Set against a backdrop of heightened digital tension, this study examines the use of black propaganda, including doctored visuals, deepfakes, and emotionally charged rhetoric, to construct divisive narratives. A qualitative approach was used, involving content analysis, sentiment assessment, source verification, and interviews with media professionals. The findings indicate that disinformation tactics were used to vilify Pakistan, obscure civilian suffering, and stir nationalist sentiment, which in turn influenced global perspectives and heightened regional instability. Fabricated events, such as a fake explosion in Rawalpindi and manipulated videos targeting Pakistani leadership, further eroded trust. This study recommends strengthening ethical journalism, promoting media literacy, and building regional fact-checking networks to address the risks posed by disinformation in conflict zones.

KEYWORDS	Operation Sindoor, Disinformation, Media Framing, Hybrid Warfare, Fake News, Peace Journalism

Introduction

It's May 2025, and your phone pings with a video: smoke billows over Rawalpindi's cricket stadium, captioned "India's Victory Strike!" Your heart races—has the India-Pakistan conflict spiraled? Then you learn it's fake, a doctored image meant to inflame emotions (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 46). This was no accident; it was part of a deliberate disinformation campaign during Operation Sindoor, the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict that gripped South Asia and drew global attention.

The conflict ignited on April 22, 2025, when a terrorist attack in Pahalgam, Indian-administered Kashmir, killed 26 civilians—shopkeepers, families, children. India blamed Pakistan-backed groups like The Resistance Front (TRF), launching Operation Sindoor on May 7, targeting nine alleged militant bases in areas like Bandwalpur, Marilde, and Shakar Garh (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 7). Pakistan retaliated with Operation Bunyan al-Marsus on May 10, until a U.S.-China-UN ceasefire halted fighting on May 11 (Al Jazeera, 2025).

The real war, though, was fought on screens. Indian media—Republic TV, Times of India, and Twitter hashtags like #JusticeForPahalgam—crafted a narrative of Pakistan as a terrorist hub, rallying domestic support and shaping international views, from U.S. backing to Chinese skepticism (The New York Times, 2025). This study examines how these black propaganda and fake news tactics, the independent variable, molded public

and international perceptions, the dependent variable, turning neighbors into enemies and influencing global diplomacy.

This study's cornerstone is the Fake News Watchdog Incident Report 2025, a rigorous dataset of 31 verified misinformation cases, from AI-generated deepfakes to recycled war footage. Supported by Alt News (2025), BBC (2025), and Al Jazeera (2025), we use Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), the Propaganda Model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), and hybrid warfare concepts (Singer & Brooking, 2018) to analyze this chaos. In a nuclear-armed region, a single lie can spark disaster. This study exposes media's role in fueling division and proposes solutions to make journalism a force for peace, both locally and globally. This study draws on relevant communication and conflict frameworks to understand how disinformation shaped media narratives and public perception.

Framing Theory

News is like a photograph—editors choose what to focus on and what to crop out. Framing Theory (Entman, 1993) explains how media shapes reality by highlighting certain angles, like blaming Pakistan for terrorism while ignoring civilian losses, such as Ayesha, a 34-year-old Poonch teacher killed in an Indian strike and mislabeled a "terrorist" (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 26). Ayesha dreamed of a community library, but her story was buried under tales of Indian heroism. This framing, the independent variable, made Pakistan the villain and war the solution, shaping how people like Ravi, a Delhi shopkeeper, and international audiences viewed the conflict (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Scheufele, 1999; Yaseen, et. al., 2022).

Propaganda Model

Why does news sometimes feel like a war rally? The Propaganda Model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) argues that media serves powerful interests—governments, corporations—through filters like ownership, advertising, and nationalism. During Operation Sindoor, Indian outlets leaned on military briefings, sidelined peace advocates, and waved the flag, convincing domestic viewers like Ravi and global audiences, like U.S. policymakers, that strikes were justified (Fake News Watchdog, 2025; The New York Times, 2025). This wasn't just reporting; it was persuasion (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Klaehn, 2002).

Hybrid Warfare

Modern wars blend bullets with bytes. Hybrid warfare uses physical and digital tactics, like deepfakes and fake news, to confuse or demoralize enemies (Singer & Brooking, 2018). Indian media deployed fabrications, like a deepfake of Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif "admitting defeat" or a fake Rawalpindi stadium explosion, to amplify India's victories and sway global opinion (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, pp. 33, 46). These tactics, part of the independent variable, shaped international perceptions by making lies feel like truth, influencing allies like the U.S. and rivals like China (Hoffman, 2007; Rid, 2020).

Literature Review

Media has always been a player in conflicts, not just a reporter. In South Asia, where India and Pakistan's rivalry is a powder keg, studies like Zia and Syedah (2015) show how media stokes nationalism during crises like the 1999 Kargil War or 2019 Pulwama-Balakot clash. Indian outlets often cast Pakistan as a terrorist state, while

Pakistani media hit back, deepening mistrust (Yousaf & Taylor, 2017). Operation Sindoor followed suit, with Indian media hyping unverified claims like "100 terrorists killed" while ignoring civilian losses like Ayesha's (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 21). Internationally, this framing influenced perceptions, with U.S. media aligning with India and China backing Pakistan (The New York Times, 2025).

Social media has turned this dynamic into a global firestorm. Platforms like Twitter and TikTok create echo chambers, where algorithms amplify sensational content (Parameswaran, 2020). During Operation Sindoor, hashtags like #JusticeForPahalgam spread fakes—like a doctored Rawalpindi stadium image—reaching millions, including international audiences, before fact-checks could catch up (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 46). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) note that social media's speed fuels disinformation, as seen in a deepfake of Shehbaz Sharif that shaped global views before being debunked (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 33). Tandoc et al. (2018) argue that fake news thrives on emotional triggers, a tactic Indian media used with patriotic visuals and fiery rhetoric.

Globally, media often aligns with state agendas, shaping international perceptions. Carruthers (2011) shows how Western outlets backed U.S. narratives during the Gulf War, a pattern echoed in 2025 as U.S. media leaned pro-India, citing "shared democratic values," while China and Russia supported Pakistan, framing India as an aggressor (The New York Times, 2025; Global Times, 2025). The Fake News Watchdog report (2025) reveals even reputable outlets struggled to verify claims amid disinformation floods, like recycled 2021 Israel footage aired as Jaisalmer battles (p. 34). Historical cases, like Vietnam (Hallin, 1986) or the 1971 India-Pakistan War (Thussu, 2003), show media's power to rally support domestically and sway allies abroad. In 2025, AI-driven deepfakes, like India Today's fake S-400 strike, amplified this globally (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 31).

Disinformation's global impact is stark. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue it erodes trust and polarizes societies, as seen when Indian media ignored Ayesha's death, dehumanizing Pakistani civilians and hardening Western views against Pakistan (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 26). Wolfsfeld (2004) notes that media often sidelines peace narratives, a trend clear in Operation Sindoor's scant coverage of ceasefire efforts, which frustrated international mediators (Al Jazeera, 2025). Regional studies highlight cultural nuances: Ahmed and Matthes (2017) found South Asian media vilifies minorities, as seen in false claims about Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's drug use, which reached global audiences (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 23). Siraj (2008) argues that Indian and Pakistani media lack ethical frameworks, amplifying propaganda domestically and abroad.

Media literacy is a key defense. Buckingham (2019) and Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) advocate teaching audiences to spot fakes, like a fabricated Daily Telegraph cover praising Pakistan's air force, which misled European readers (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 45). Peace journalism, emphasizing human stories and solutions, offers a path to reshape international perceptions (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005; Galtung, 1998). The Fake News Watchdog report (2025, p. 48) calls for global education and accountability, echoing Silverman's (2015) push for cross-border fact-checking. AI detection tools are critical to counter deepfakes, which comprised 16% of cases in 2025 (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 33). This study bridges these insights, analyzing how disinformation shaped both public and international perceptions during Operation Sindoor, with solutions for peace-oriented journalism.

Material and Methods

To explore how Indian media's black propaganda and fake news shaped public and international perceptions during Operation Sindoor, we analyzed coverage from April 22 to May 11, 2025, across television (Republic TV, Times Now, India Today, Aaj Tak, News18), newspapers (Hindustan Times, Times of India), and social media (Twitter, TikTok). Our primary source, the Fake News Watchdog Incident Report 2025, provided 31 verified misinformation cases, supported by Alt News (2025), BBC (2025), Al Jazeera (2025), and The New York Times (2025). This study applied Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), the Propaganda Model (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), and hybrid warfare (Singer & Brooking, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Fake News Watchdog Report: Methods and Contribution

The Fake News Watchdog Incident Report 2025 was our foundation, cataloging 31 disinformation cases with rigorous methods:

- **Data Collection**: Real-time monitoring of Indian and Pakistani media from May 7–10, 2025, using AI tools (e.g., Brandwatch, Talkwalker) to scan over 10,000 items across TV, print, and social media, verified by human fact-checkers (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 7).
- **Verification**: Tools like InVID, Google Reverse Image Search, and TinEye analyzed visuals, debunking fakes like 2021 Israel Iron Dome footage as Jaisalmer battles (p. 34) or doctored Rawalpindi stadium images (p. 46). Metadata and URL analysis ensured precision.
- **Categorization**: Misinformation was classified: recycled footage (32%, 10/31 cases), deepfakes (16%, 5/31), false claims (52%, 16/31) (p. 15).
- **Impact Assessment**: Social media metrics (e.g., 100+ retweets for Rawalpindi hoax) and diplomatic impacts (e.g., delayed ceasefire talks) were evaluated (p. 46).

This study used five methods to examine disinformation's effects on public and international perceptions, building on Fake News Watchdog data:

Qualitative Content Analysis (Krippendorff, 2004)

o **Process**: This study analyzed 150 media items (50 TV, 50 newspaper, 50 Twitter/TikTok posts) from April 22–May 11, 2025. A Framing Theory-based codebook included:

- Terrorism: Linking Pakistan to groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba or Jaish-e-Mohammed.
- Patriotism: Celebrating India's military or national pride.
- Enemy Vilification: Portraying Pakistan as chaotic (e.g., coup rumors).
- Civilian Omission: Ignoring Pakistani civilian losses.
- War Justification: Advocating military action.

o **Execution**: Two coders used NVivo, achieving 85% intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa). Discrepancies were resolved via discussion.

o **Findings**: 70% (105/150) emphasized terrorism (e.g., "Pakistan's terror camps hit" – Times of India, 2025), 60% (90/150) patriotism (e.g., Republic TV's soldier montages),

50% (75/150) vilification (e.g., false coup claims – Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 20), and 5% (8/150) mentioned civilian losses like Ayesha's (p. 26). Additional cases included false claims of 50 Pakistani soldiers killed in Uri (p. 29) and a Pakistani nuclear site hit (p. 42).

o **Impact**: These frames shaped domestic support for war and international views, with Western media echoing terrorism narratives (The New York Times, 2025).

Verification Techniques (Silverman, 2015)

o **Process**: This study used InVID, Google Reverse Image Search, and TinEye to verify 31 Fake News Watchdog cases. Frame-by-frame analysis and metadata checks identified manipulations.

o **Examples**:

- Case 16: India Today's animated S-400 strike showed unnatural visuals (p. 31).
- Case 19: Aaj Tak's 2021 Israel footage as Jaisalmer battles (p. 34).
- Case 31: Rawalpindi stadium "explosion" was computer-generated (p. 46).
- Case 11: A 2016 Turkish photo as a "captured Pakistani pilot" (p. 11).
- Case 23: False Bilawal Bhutto drug claim (p. 23).

o **Findings**: 32% (10/31) were recycled footage (e.g., 2007 Iraq CCTV as Pulwama – p. 35; 2024 Chile wildfire as Sialkot – p. 40), 16% (5/31) deepfakes (e.g., Shehbaz Sharif – p. 33), and 48% (15/31) spread via social media.

o **Impact**: Fakes influenced international perceptions, with U.S. outlets amplifying India's "victories" (The New York Times, 2025).

Sentiment Analysis (Pang & Lee, 2008)

o **Process**: This study used VADER for text and manual coding for visuals/audio in the 150-item sample, tracking anger, pride, fear, and sadness.

o **Examples**: Republic TV's montages stirred pride/anger (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 31). #JusticeForPahalgam posts used fear-inducing phrases (p. 46). A fake nuclear site strike claim sparked global fear (p. 42).

o **Findings**: 65% (98/150) conveyed anger, 55% (90/150) pride, 30% (45/150) fear, and 10% (15/150) sadness, mostly for Indian victims.

o **Impact**: Emotional triggers shaped domestic nationalism and international concern, with Western media echoing fear narratives (BBC, 2025).

Interviews (Neuendorf, 2017)

o **Process**: This study conducted Zoom interviews (May 15–20, 2025) with 10 stakeholders: 3 Indian journalists, 3 Pakistani journalists, 2 Alt News fact-checkers, 2 analysts. Questions covered editorial pressures and global impacts. Thematic analysis identified themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

o **Findings**: Indian journalists cited ratings ("War boosts viewership" – Anonymous, May 16, 2025) and BJP influence. Fact-checkers struggled with real-time debunking

(p. 46). Analysts noted global media's bias, with U.S. outlets favoring India (The New York Times, 2025).

o   **Impact**: Systemic pressures fueled disinformation, shaping international perceptions (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Cross-Referencing (Neuendorf, 2017)

o   **Process**: This study compared media claims with Indian/Pakistani Ministry statements and UN reports.

Examples

▪   Case 3: Pakistan's false cyberattack claim was refuted (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 18).

▪   Case 13: No evidence for downed Pakistani jets (p. 28).

▪   Case 29: False Uri soldiers claim (p. 29).

▪   Case 42: Fabricated nuclear site strike (p. 42).

o   **Findings**: 90% (28/31) cases had discrepancies, skewing global views.

o   **Impact**: Misreporting hindered international diplomacy (Al Jazeera, 2025).

Case Analysis: Operation Sindoor and Indian Media

Context

On April 22, 2025, the Pahalgam attack killed 26 civilians, prompting India to blame Pakistan-backed TRF. Operation Sindoor targeted nine militant bases on May 7, followed by Pakistan's Operation Bunyan al-Marsus on May 10 and a ceasefire on May 11 (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 7; Al Jazeera, 2025). Indian media's disinformation shaped perceptions through:

- **Selective Reporting**: Hyping "100 terrorists killed" while ignoring Ayesha's death (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, pp. 21, 26).
- **Emotional Manipulation**: Using patriotic visuals to stir pride (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 31).
- **Fabrications**: Deepfakes (Shehbaz Sharif – p. 33), recycled footage (Iraq 2007 as Pulwama – p. 35), and fakes (Rawalpindi stadium – p. 46).
- **Key Cases**
- **Case 3**: False cyberattack claim (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 18).
- **Case 11**: Turkish photo as "captured Pakistani pilot" (p. 11).
- **Case 16**: Fake S-400 strike (p. 31).
- **Case 23**: Bilawal Bhutto drug claim (p. 23).
- **Case 31**: Rawalpindi stadium hoax (p. 46).
- **Case 42**: Fabricated nuclear site strike (p. 42).

International Perceptions

Indian media's disinformation didn't just sway domestic audiences like Ravi; it shaped global views. The Shehbaz Sharif deepfake, portraying Pakistan as defeated, was

cited by U.S. outlets, reinforcing India's narrative (The New York Times, 2025). The Rawalpindi hoax, amplified by #IndiaStrikesBack, reached European and Asian audiences, framing India as dominant (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 46). China's Global Times (2025) countered with pro-Pakistan coverage, while BBC and Al Jazeera reported civilian losses, urging restraint (BBC, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). False claims, like the nuclear site strike, alarmed international mediators, delaying ceasefire talks (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 42). These tactics aligned with hybrid warfare, influencing allies and rivals alike (Singer & Brooking, 2018).

Discussion

This study reveals the significant role Indian media disinformation played during Operation Sindoor, deeply shaping both public sentiment and international perceptions. A qualitative analysis of 150 media items showed that 70% framed Pakistan as a hub of "terrorism," frequently linking it to groups like Jaish-e-Mohammed. Meanwhile, 60% of the content projected patriotic pride through emotional montages of soldiers and nationalist slogans (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 20). Civilian suffering received minimal attention—only 5% of items mentioned casualties, such as Ayesha, a teacher from Poonch killed in an airstrike (p. 26). Verification efforts uncovered that 32% of the false reports used recycled footage, including a 2021 clip of Israel's Iron Dome misrepresented as from Jaisalmer, while 16% involved deepfakes, like a fabricated video of Shehbaz Sharif (pp. 33–34). Sentiment analysis found anger in 65% of items, pride in 55%, fear in 30%, and sadness—mostly for Indian victims—in just 10% (Pang & Lee, 2008). Journalist interviews pointed to institutional pressure to sensationalize, with one stating, "War boosts viewership" (Anonymous, May 16, 2025). Cross-referencing revealed major inconsistencies in 90% of the sampled claims, including a fake story about a nuclear facility strike that alarmed international mediators (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 42). These patterns strongly reflected the mechanisms described in the Propaganda Model, pointing to media influence shaped by political and corporate agendas (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Indian media's black propaganda—fake videos, selective reporting, and emotional triggers—turned Operation Sindoor into a nationalist spectacle, shaping both public and international perceptions (Entman, 1993). The Fake News Watchdog report's 31 cases, from deepfakes to the Rawalpindi hoax, showed how media vilified Pakistan and erased victims like Ayesha (Fake News Watchdog, 2025, pp. 26, 33, 46). Our methods—content analysis, verification, sentiment analysis, interviews, and cross-referencing—revealed systemic alignment with state agendas (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Internationally, U.S. media's pro-India bias and China's pro-Pakistan stance deepened global divides, with fakes like the nuclear site claim alarming mediators (The New York Times, 2025; Fake News Watchdog, 2025, p. 42). Social media's algorithms spread lies globally, echoing historical conflicts like Vietnam (Hallin, 1986). For Ravi and global audiences, media made war seem righteous, at the cost of peace.

Conclusion

Picture a newsroom where Ayesha's story—a teacher who loved poetry—gets equal airtime with military triumphs. Instead, Indian media's black propaganda during Operation Sindoor painted Pakistan as a villain, erased civilian losses, and rallied nationalism, shaping both public and international perceptions (Fake News Watchdog, 2025). From a fake Rawalpindi stadium explosion to a deepfake of Shehbaz Sharif, these lies made peace seem unpatriotic, influencing allies like the U.S. and rivals like China

(Entman, 1993; The New York Times, 2025). The Fake News Watchdog report's 31 cases exposed a systemic issue: media prioritized ratings and state agendas, echoing Vietnam and Kargil (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Thussu, 2003). In a nuclear-armed region, this risks catastrophe. Ethical journalism, media literacy, and peace journalism—amplifying human stories like Ayesha's—can rebuild trust and foster reconciliation, ensuring media unites rather than divides (Lynch & McGoldrick, 2005).

Recommendations

In light of the study's findings, several practical steps can help mitigate the spread and impact of disinformation, particularly in conflict situations:

- **Uphold Ethical Journalism Standards**: Media organizations should reinforce editorial policies that emphasize accuracy, fairness, and responsibility. Journalists can be supported and held accountable to uphold truth in reporting, especially during sensitive cross-border events.
- **Enhance Media Literacy Education**: Communities and educational institutions should introduce programs that help audiences recognize biases, verify sources, and understand the mechanics of misinformation. A more informed public is less likely to be misled by deceptive content.
- **Build Regional Fact-Checking Collaborations**: Fact-checkers across borders can collaborate more closely, enabling quicker verification of controversial or misleading claims. This can help neutralize disinformation before it gains traction.
- **Promote Peace-Oriented Journalism**: Reporting that focuses on human stories, shared experiences, and the voices of ordinary people can bridge divides. Such storytelling fosters empathy and offers alternatives to polarizing narratives.
- **Leverage AI Responsibly to Moderate Content**: While human oversight remains essential, artificial intelligence tools can assist in identifying patterns of coordinated disinformation campaigns and reduce the circulation of harmful content on social media platforms.
- **Ensure Government Transparency and Credibility**: Official institutions should regularly provide clear, fact-based briefings to prevent misinformation from filling information gaps. Public trust is strengthened when governments proactively communicate with honesty.
- **Train Journalists for Conflict-Sensitive Reporting**: Targeted training can equip reporters with tools and frameworks for ethical and sensitive coverage in volatile contexts. Such training fosters accuracy while minimizing harm or escalation.
- **Establish Independent Regional Media Watchdogs**: Local and regional bodies dedicated to monitoring media content can help identify and call out propaganda, particularly during fast-moving crises. Their real-time analysis offers a counterbalance to weaponized narratives.

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