



Social Media and Solutions for Detecting Fake News: A Study of Four Northern Provinces of Afghanistan

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Abstract: social media, commonly known as social networks, has become a prominent platform for fulfilling users' information needs because of its many advantages and features. Along with its immense popularity, users encounter much false and misleading information through these platforms. The main objective of this research is to detect and identify fake news and misinformation in Afghanistan. This research employed a survey method and questionnaire tool. The target population consisted of journalists, students of journalism faculties in four provinces (Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab, and Baghlan), and media managers. The sampling method used was random, and 300 questionnaires were distributed. After the data was collected and completed, it was analyzed descriptively using SPSS software. The theoretical foundation of this research is grounded in the "network society" and "filter bubble." theories. The findings indicated that within the statistical community under investigation, the level of recognition and critical analysis of information and media content by social media users is significantly low. This deficiency contributes to several concerning issues, including the facilitation of psychological warfare, the prevalence of ambiguous information sources, and the widespread inability to distinguish between fake news and factual content. These factors collectively result in manipulating public opinion, increased confusion in understanding factual news, susceptibility to suggestion, social disillusionment, and a growing sense of pessimism among consumers toward societal actors and vice versa. Additionally, this environment fosters the undeserved credibility of individuals who spread misinformation, encourages hasty decision-making, and promotes economic and informational consumerism.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's digitally connected world, distinguishing between credible and fake news on social media has become increasingly challenging. The global proliferation of communication technologies has revolutionized how people access, consume, and share information.

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However, this rapid advancement has also made users vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation. As technology evolves, the line between fact and fiction becomes increasingly blurred. This is especially true in environments with limited media literacy, where people are more susceptible to deceptive content. Like many developing nations, Afghanistan faces serious challenges, as social media has become a dominant source of news and information for large population segments.

The rise of fake news—false or misleading information presented as news intending to deceive—has become a pressing global issue. While misinformation has always existed in various forms, the speed and scale at which it spreads today is unprecedented. This trend is particularly alarming in contexts with limited access to formal education, reliable media sources, and digital literacy skills. In Afghanistan, a country grappling with prolonged instability and a fragile media infrastructure, the influence of fake news on public perception and social trust is particularly destructive. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have become primary tools for news dissemination, yet they are also conduits for unverified, misleading, and often harmful content.

Afghan social media users are particularly vulnerable to the influence of fake news due to the country's complex sociopolitical context and the relatively low media and digital literacy levels among the population. In such environments, people often lack the critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate the accuracy of online information. As a result, many cannot differentiate between credible and fake news. This inability undermines public trust in legitimate news outlets and institutions, further destabilizing a volatile society. Consequently, fake news does not just misinform individuals—it affects public discourse, influences political decisions, and weakens democratic processes.

In today's digital era, when information is produced and consumed at an unprecedented rate, the ability to critically assess the authenticity of content has become a crucial skill. As Mehdizadeh and Sirat (2021) note, the phenomenon of fake news is not new. It existed long before the digital age, but social media has significantly expanded its scope and impact. Fake news now affects various aspects of human life, from politics and economics to social relationships and education. When individuals cannot distinguish between real and fake news, they are likely to make misinformed decisions that can have serious personal, social, and national consequences.

According to studies by Zhou et al. (2020), even scientific and academic communities are not immune to the spread of fake or manipulated information. Some researchers, driven by ambition, money, or ideology, may falsify their data and publish it in reputable journals. Such misconduct has eroded public trust in the credibility of research and academic institutions. In the public sphere, the impact is even more pronounced. False information is often deliberately disseminated by media outlets, public figures, or anonymous accounts to advance specific agendas—whether political, ideological, or financial. The intentional spread of such information directly affects public attitudes and behaviors.

The motivations behind the production of fake news vary widely. As Rini (2017) argues, fake news can be created to damage someone's reputation, to promote certain ideologies, or simply to gain attention. In some cases, fake news destabilizes societies by undermining public confidence in institutions. In other cases, it is used to manipulate elections, shape political narratives, or incite violence. Moreover, as Kalsnes (2018) notes, the distinction between fake and real news is unclear. Technically true information may be misleading due to its context, presentation, or selective framing.

Another factor contributing to the spread of fake news is the structure and function of social media platforms themselves. These platforms are designed to maximize engagement, often through algorithms that prioritize emotionally charged, sensational, or controversial content. This design encourages the rapid spread of fake news, as users are more likely to share content that elicits strong emotional reactions. As Pennycook and Rand (2021) point out, people often share information online without critically evaluating its accuracy. This behavior is influenced by cognitive biases, such as the tendency to believe information that confirms existing beliefs (confirmation bias) or to trust information shared by friends and family (social endorsement bias).

In the Afghan context, these challenges are compounded by the country's sociopolitical realities. Decades of war, political instability, and social fragmentation have created an environment where distrust is widespread and information is often weaponized. Fake news exploits these vulnerabilities by reinforcing existing divisions, spreading rumors, and creating confusion. As a result, people may lose trust not only in the media but also in public institutions, experts, and even each other. This loss of trust is particularly harmful in a country like Afghanistan, where rebuilding social cohesion is critical to national recovery and development.

The psychological impact of fake news is also significant. Continual exposure to false or misleading information can lead to confusion, anxiety, and a sense of helplessness. When constantly bombarded with conflicting narratives, people may become cynical or disengaged from public affairs altogether. Researchers have observed that this phenomenon can erode democratic values and reduce civic participation. The consequences can be even more severe in crises, such as natural disasters, armed conflict, or health emergencies. Fake news can spread panic, hinder emergency responses, and put lives at risk.

Despite the seriousness of the issue, many Afghan social media users lack the necessary skills and resources to critically evaluate online content. As Mehdizadeh and Sirat (2021) emphasize, media literacy remains underdeveloped in Afghanistan. Most users rely heavily on social media for information but lack the tools to verify or contextualize what they read. In this environment, rumors and conspiracy theories can spread unchecked, while genuine expertise and fact-based reporting are often ignored or mistrusted.

To combat the spread of fake news, it is essential to understand how users perceive and interact with online content. This study aims to investigate the ability of Afghan social media

users to distinguish fake news from real news. It also seeks to identify the factors that influence this ability, such as education level, digital literacy, exposure to traditional media, and trust in institutions. In doing so, the research will offer insights into how fake news circulates in Afghan social media spaces and what can be done to mitigate its impact.

Furthermore, the study will explore practical strategies for improving media literacy and promoting critical thinking among Afghan social media users. These may include public awareness campaigns, educational programs, and digital tools that help users verify information. Given the cultural and contextual factors at play, these interventions must be tailored to Afghan society's specific needs and realities. For example, initiatives might focus on educating users about the characteristics of fake news, the importance of source evaluation, and the psychological factors that influence information sharing.

Ultimately, addressing the fake news problem requires a multi-faceted approach combining research, education, technology, and public engagement. Scholars, policymakers, educators, and tech companies must work together to build a more resilient information ecosystem where individuals are empowered to think critically, question assumptions, and make informed decisions. In Afghanistan, where social media is increasingly central in public life, this task is urgent and essential.

In response to this pressing challenge, the present study aims to answer the following research question:

1. To what extent is the statistical population of this study able to distinguish between fake and real news, and what strategies can be implemented to improve their ability to do so?
2. What proportion of respondents can accurately distinguish between fake and real news on social networks?
3. Which solutions can enhance the audience's ability to distinguish between authentic and fake information on social media platforms?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on two theories: the Network Society Theory and the Filter Bubble Theory. These two theories are fundamental in media studies to distinguish authentic information from fake information, which will be discussed individually in the following sections.

The Network Society Theory: This theory was introduced by Castells in the 1990s and thoroughly analyzed in his book *Network Society: Institutional Developments in the Information Age*. According to this theory, modern society has evolved into a network society, wherein communication networks establish connections between individuals, organizations, and institutions, profoundly impacting social, political, economic, and cultural structures. The relevance of this theory to the current research lies in two key aspects: first, its strong correlation with social media, and second, the fact that new media are products of the

network society. In the network society described by Castells, the Internet and new communication technologies, with their extensive networking capabilities, provide a platform for interaction and the enhancement of social relations globally. Integrating new communication technologies with social networking systems has introduced innovative social structures and relationships across various domains (Castells, 2018).

A network society is reshaping the nature of human societies, including disseminating information and news on social media (Mehdizadeh & Sirat, 2021, p 16). As human societies witness the growth of new communication technologies and the increasing use of advanced tools to propagate fake news, there is a pressing need to focus on recognizing and identifying misleading information—a subject explored in this research. In a network society, producing, publishing, selecting, and receiving media content have undergone significant transformations due to fundamental changes in the media landscape.

Considering the primary context of producing, disseminating, and consuming fake news, along with the extensive accessibility of social media to users, the theory of the network society serves as an essential framework for effectively articulating and conceptualizing the research problem. The original sentence had no significant grammatical errors but could benefit from smoother phrasing and slight restructuring for readability.

Filter Bubble Theory: This theory examines the social contexts and networks that facilitate the formation and spread of fake news. According to the theory, a defining characteristic of social networks is their subtle control, invisibility, and ability to disguise themselves behind a virtual mask, raising questions such as: Who are you? What do you do? What do you ultimately seek? (Spoor, 2017). The filter bubble refers to intellectual isolation when social media platforms use algorithms to present information tailored to users' preferences (Greifeneder et al., 2021, p. 39). Given the vast volume of information available to users today through social networks, significant time is required to consume such information.

This often leaves users with insufficient opportunities to critically analyze and evaluate the content to distinguish between true and false information. Another critical aspect of the filter bubble phenomenon in social networks is users' exposure to cognitive and selective distortions. Typically, individuals gravitate toward consuming information that aligns with their existing beliefs. Conversely, they tend to reject information that contradicts their views, a phenomenon known as "confirmation bias." This tendency can lead to unwarranted self-confidence, as individuals reinforce their beliefs without adequately challenging or scrutinizing them.

Ideological polarization is another consequence of the filter bubble created by social media networks in the dissemination of fake news. In today's world, most of the information we receive does not stem from direct personal experiences but rather from various information sources, particularly the media. Social media now occupies a leading position among these sources. By propagating fake news, social media platforms contribute to ideological polarization,

resulting in societal challenges such as a diminished capacity for reasoning and a lack of diversity in opinions. Addressing this issue requires raising public awareness and enhancing individuals' ability to critically consume information through social media.

Some researchers argue that social media fosters a phenomenon known as filter bubbles, wherein users are exposed only to specific information and content that align with their preferences, effectively confining them to limited informational space (Lees, 2014, p. 276). Fake news, in terms of its structure and content, presents users with a distorted and inaccurate depiction of events around them. When a user, intentionally or unintentionally, personalizes the information they consume, they become ensnared in the filter bubble, which can profoundly influence their thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors in both personal and social contexts. The user becomes unknowingly trapped within a mass of fabricated and unreal information. Correctly understanding the filter bubble phenomenon is essential for recognizing false news and misinformation on social media platforms.

RESEARCH METHOD

We used a quantitative survey to gather the necessary responses to achieve the desired outcome. Given the circumstances of social network users in Afghanistan, this study required input from individuals who have at least a basic understanding of fake news and accurate information. The survey method is a common technique in media research used to gather the opinions of audiences and media users. The statistical population studied includes professors from the Faculty of Journalism, students of this faculty, and media practitioners and managers at the local and national levels.

The respondents to the questionnaires in this study consist of 300 individuals, including professors and students from the Faculty of Journalism at Balkh University, the Faculty of Journalism at Baghlan University, the Department of Journalism at Jawzjan University, and the Department of Journalism at Faryab University, as well as media officials and experts from these four provinces. The questionnaires were distributed primarily based on the respondents' availability and willingness to participate in the study and answer the research questions. The questionnaire for this study was primarily divided into two sections. The first section focused on the respondents' characteristics, such as their occupations. The second section included questions based on the research objectives, designed to capture the respondents' perspectives regarding their ability to distinguish between fake and authentic news on social networks, along with possible solutions.

Like other research methods, the survey method possesses the characteristics of a systematic approach. In other words, it is a path that travels from the beginning with a source, emphasizing knowing an audience and their characteristics to the end of a destination. In a more precise definition, a "collection survey is a systematic and standard method used to collect information about individuals, families, or larger groups." According to the definition, it is understood that the word "survey" refers to both the tools used to collect data and the processes used when using that tool (Naqibulsadat, 2012, p. 17).

FINDINGS

This research attempts to identify the indicators of fake news from authentic information in social networks. What are the goals and dissemination of fake news on social media, and what are the effects and consequences of consuming false and fake news on individuals and society? Meanwhile, investigating the ability to distinguish the statistical population of the research as the target population is also on the agenda of this research.

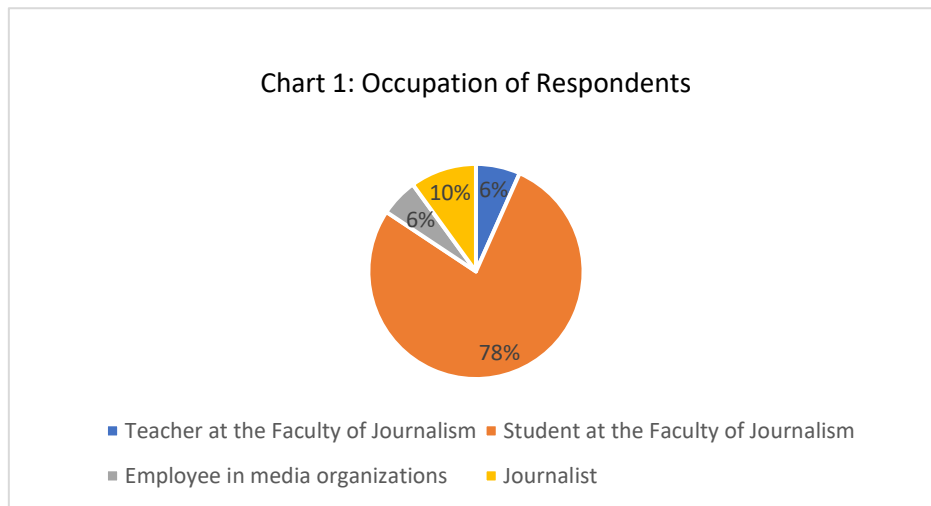


Figure 1. Occupation of Respondents

To obtain the desired and purposeful results, the target population in this study includes four groups of people who have more understanding and ability to identify the existence of fake information in these media than other social groups about social media. Regarding the statistics covered, the number of students seems far more than that of professors, media workers, and journalists. In other words, most of the questionnaire respondents in this study were journalism students, accounting for 234 individuals or 78% of the total. Journalists ranked second, comprising approximately 30 individuals or 10%. The most minor proportion of respondents—each group representing 6% or 18 individuals—were faculty members of journalism departments and media officials and practitioners.

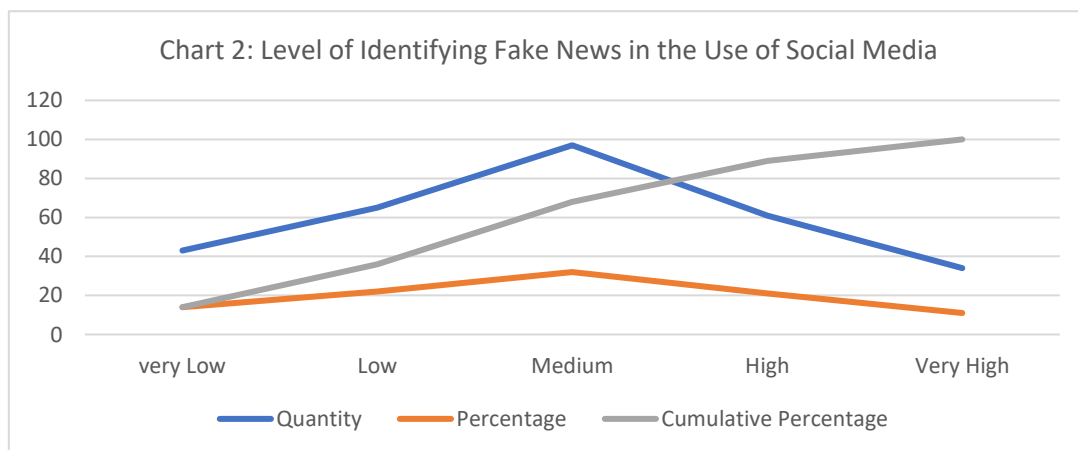


Figure 2. Level of Identifying Fake News in the Use of Social Media

According to the findings illustrated in Figure 2 of this study, the lowest detection rate of fake news on social networks is the "very high" option, with only 11% of the respondents claiming the high power of detecting fake news on social media. The highest proportion of respondents (32%) selected the 'medium' option " option with their level of distinguishing between true and false information. This shows that the ability to detect false and misleading news and information is one of the serious challenges among most people who do not even have a high level of literacy. One of the key questions in this research is to assess the statistical population's ability to differentiate between fake and real news. The findings, illustrated in Figure 2, reveal that only 11% of the respondents—33 individuals out of 300—can accurately identify fake news. Therefore, we conclude that the ability to distinguish fake news among the participants surveyed on social networks is low.

Fake news is hard to detect in people who use knowledge and experience in journalism, even those who are responsible for editing, preparing, and publishing news, so how can this challenge be multiplied by the overwhelming majority of people whose ability to read and write is at a very low level? To distinguish fake news from accurate information, one must have the ability to analyze media messages to distinguish authentic information from false information. Additionally, analyzing and understanding the functions and capabilities of different social networks is a strategy that helps distinguish fake news from real news.

Table 1: Indicators for Identifying Fake News by Social Media Users from the Respondents' Perspective

Indicators	Quantity	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Media literacy	57	19%	19%
High level of awareness	44	14.6%	33.6%
Digital literacy	42	14.2%	47.8%
Ability to analyze media messages	51	17%	64.8%
Ability to analyze social media	27	9%	73.8%
User behavior analysis	31	10.2%	84%
Credibility and identification of information sources	45	15%	99%
Others	3	1%	100%
Total	300	100%	

Based on the findings of Table 1, each of the studied indicators can be an effective solution in detecting fake news from the perspective of the respondents of this study. Of course, before presenting and describing the findings of this table, it should be noted that these indicators can vary according to the conditions.

The findings of this table show that having media literacy in detecting fake news on social networks is at the top (19%) of confirmation options. Having media literacy is a lifelong education, and knowing is one of the primary elements of media literacy. With knowledge, individuals can analyze media messages to consume information consciously and critically

evaluate the content. With learning, the power to analyze media messages has been created, and the user can act consciously in consuming information and have a critical view of the content of media messages.

The option of the power of analyzing the media message is in the second row of the approval of the respondents of this study. The ability to analyze media messages is also a product of media literacy. Examining various dimensions of media messages through the stages of media literacy enhances the user's ability to evaluate them critically. The credibility of the source of information and content provided to users through social media is also one of the most significant issues approved by the audience in the indicators of the ability to detect fake news and accurate information in social media. The high level of user awareness, which is the product of the user's knowledge, is in the next row, and having digital literacy, which is also a part of media literacy, is in the solutions for detecting fake news.

Table 2: *The role of Media literacy in Identifying Fake News on Social Media from the Respondents' Perspective*

Level of Impact	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Very High	115	38.33%	38.33%
High	87	29.0%	67.32%
Medium	56	18.66%	85.99%
Low	40	13.33%	99.32%
Very Low	2	0.66%	100%
Total	300	100%	

The findings of Table 2 of this study illustrate how respondents perceive the role of media literacy in differentiating fake news from real news on prominent social networks. Based on the findings of this table, 38.33% (115) of the total respondents, which shows the highest number, consider the role of media literacy to be decisive and fundamental in distinguishing and differentiating real news and information from distorted news and information on social networks. In the objectives and questions set in this study, identifying solutions for distinguishing fake news was also a fundamental topic. Based on the respondents' perspectives, this study's findings indicated that possessing media literacy is the best solution.

In Table 1 of this study, indicators such as awareness, digital literacy, and the ability to analyze and understand the audience are highlighted as fundamental solutions. However, all of these capabilities can ultimately be attained through the development of media literacy.

DISCUSSION

Upon reviewing internal and international sources related to the topics, The main objective of this study was to assess users' ability to recognize fake news on social networks and identify strategies to improve this ability. This research revealed that only 11% of respondents reported a high ability to detect fake news, while the majority identified their skill as moderate or low. This indicates a significant gap in critical news literacy, even among journalism students and media professionals. This outcome directly addresses our first

research question and confirms that the target population's ability to distinguish fake from real news remains weak.

In the article *"Fake News and Ways to Counter It"* by Soltanifar et al. (2017), published in Iran, the findings emphasized the importance of strengthening public understanding as the most effective way to combat misinformation. While their research focused on Iran, the current study in Afghanistan draws similar conclusions despite different social and educational contexts. Both studies underline the central role of media literacy in enhancing users' resilience against fake news. However, our research extends this insight by providing data from a younger population, primarily students, who are expected to play a future role in media industries.

Moreover, another study was conducted by Zahra Majdizadeh and Seyyed Milad Mousavi Haghshenas in 2019 under the title *"What Is Fake News and Why It Exists in the Digital Age."* Focused on fake news's theoretical nature and characteristics, our study provides practical insight into how users perceive and respond to it. Their work offered no solutions, whereas our respondents emphasized the importance of raising awareness, promoting digital and media literacy, and enhancing critical thinking as tools for fake news detection. This suggests that while theoretical understanding is foundational, actionable strategies and user education are urgently needed, particularly in contexts with lower media awareness.

Another study titled *"Fake News Detection on Social Networks"* by Shen et al. (2023) classified detection methods into content-based, propagation-based, and source-based categories. Their emphasis on machine learning, social psychology, and multimodal analysis highlights how technological advancements are leveraged to combat misinformation. However, such models often require extensive data and infrastructure, which may not be accessible or feasible in countries like Afghanistan. This highlights a key difference: whereas Shen et al. focus on high-level technical solutions, our study emphasizes grassroots approaches such as user education, localized interventions, and policy-level reforms.

Additionally, Shen et al. (2023) identify the cultural limitations of automated systems—an issue that our study addresses more directly. Our findings show that any effective strategy for identifying and countering fake news must be culturally and contextually grounded. Respondents stressed that without basic literacy and access to training, even journalists struggle to differentiate fake news, emphasizing the importance of tailoring solutions to the specific media ecosystem of each country. Our study supports existing literature acknowledging media literacy as a key defense against fake news. However, it extends this body of knowledge by offering localized, practical recommendations for implementation in contexts like Afghanistan. These include integrating media literacy into university curricula, training media professionals in content verification, and encouraging platforms to promote transparency in information dissemination.

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to examine the presence, recognition, and consequences of fake news on social media platforms in the context of Afghanistan—particularly in the four northern provinces of Balkh, Jawzjan, Faryab, and Baghlan. Through a quantitative survey involving journalism students, media professionals, and journalists, the study explored how Afghan users engage with information on social networks, their challenges in identifying misinformation, and the strategies that might effectively address these challenges. The findings reveal that Afghan social media users struggle to distinguish fake news from authentic information. Despite regular access to digital platforms, most users lack sufficient media literacy, digital literacy, and critical thinking skills to analyze media messages effectively. Only 11% of respondents demonstrated a strong ability to detect fake news, while most assessed their skills as moderate or low. This underscores the urgent need for interventions to enhance users' evaluative and interpretive capacities.

Several key indicators were identified as essential for improving fake news detection. These include media literacy, the ability to analyze media messages, credibility assessment of information sources, digital literacy, and a general awareness of user behavior in digital environments. Among these, media literacy emerged as the most significant factor. Therefore, a sustainable and practical approach to mitigating fake news in Afghanistan must prioritize enhancing users' capacity to interpret, critique, and verify digital content.

Moreover, the study highlighted that spreading fake news is not only a technological or informational problem but also a social and psychological one. Fake news contributes to psychological manipulation, public confusion, ideological polarization, and the erosion of trust in institutions and the media. Addressing this issue requires more than technical solutions—it demands investment in education, public awareness campaigns, and media training initiatives. Given Afghanistan's current socio-political instability, low literacy rates, and the lack of structured fact-checking institutions, combating misinformation requires grassroots strategies. These include integrating media literacy into educational curricula, establishing accessible training programs, and utilizing social media platforms to promote fact-checking behaviors and awareness.

In conclusion, while technological solutions can support the detection of misinformation, the foundation of resistance to fake news lies in an informed and critically aware society. Empowering Afghan users through media and digital literacy is not only a practical solution but a necessary step toward reducing the influence of fake news and enhancing the integrity of information consumption on social networks.

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