

Fake News and the Youth: A Crisis of Trust or A Catalyst for a Smarter Knowledge Economy?

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<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijsmt.v2i5.582>

Cite this Article: Tomar, A. S. (2026). Fake News and the Youth: A Crisis of Trust or A Catalyst for a Smarter Knowledge Economy?. International Journal of Science, Strategic Management and Technology, 02(05). <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijsmt.v2i5.582>

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Abstract

Fake news has become a defining challenge for the Commonwealth, home to more than 1.5 billion young people whose digital habits shape the region's social, political, and economic future. Youth increasingly encounter news through TikTok, WhatsApp, and influencers rather than traditional journalism, making them vulnerable to emotionally persuasive misinformation. Case studies from Kenya, India, Trinidad and Tobago, and the UK show how false content influences electoral behaviour, heightens social tensions, and exploits institutional mistrust. Economically, misinformation has disrupted tourism in Fiji and Barbados, damaged local markets in Ghana, and hindered public health efforts during COVID-19 in South Africa and Pakistan. Commonwealth responses, including fact-checking networks, digital literacy programs, and community-led initiatives, show promise but struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving disinformation tactics. Despite the risks, the crisis has intensified interest in critical thinking, digital ethics, and information governance, creating new opportunities for youth engagement and employment in knowledge-driven fields. Fake news thus represents both a threat to democratic trust and an opportunity to strengthen digital resilience across the Commonwealth.

In the Commonwealth, a political community with over 1.5 billion individuals under thirty, fake news has emerged as one of the most prevalent issues influencing young people's digital experiences. Because of this demographic reality, misinformation has an impact on the social, political, and economic destinies of the area. Today's youth live in an information-rich, fast-paced, highly social world that is unsettlingly unregulated. On services that prioritize emotion above accuracy, news faces competition from entertainment. Young people in India, Nigeria, the UK, and other member nations report seeing more "news" from TikTok videos, WhatsApp forwards, and social media influencers than from traditional journalism. According to a 2024 Reuters Institute survey, almost 40% of young people get their news mostly from short-form video platforms, where conjecture, opinion, and humor are given the same weight as proven facts. This change has essentially undermined conventional verification filters, leaving young people more receptive to compelling rather than accurate information. Maintaining public safety, democratic trust, and the health of future knowledge economies all depend on an understanding of how they interact with this environment.

Young people's actual experiences with internet news are significantly more complex than conventional assessments frequently imply. News is presented in the context of social interaction and entertainment, eliciting feelings rather than thoughtful contemplation. During the 2022 Kenyan elections, a teenager in Nairobi browsing TikTok would come across dozens of brief videos including altered footage or made-up statements about politicians, many of which were made to target particular ethnic groups or geographical areas. According to Human Rights Watch, political tensions increased as a

result of this surge in youth-targeted disinformation, prompting Kenya's electoral commission to officially act. Similar to this, the BBC's "Beyond Fake News" research revealed how false information spread quickly among young voters on WhatsApp during India's 2019 general elections—the biggest in the Commonwealth—with forwarded messages reaching millions of people in a matter of hours. These instances show that disinformation is a deeply social phenomenon that is influenced by identification, belonging, and emotional resonance in addition to being a technology one.

Although case studies often reveal a mismatch between confidence and ability, young people frequently think they can spot fake news with ease. For instance, false information about crime and gang activity circulated among young people on Facebook in Trinidad and Tobago in 2021, causing panic and changing public behavior even though the authorities confirmed the material was untrue. During the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, false information concerning immigration and economic projections spread quickly on social media, swaying young voters who were already dubious of conventional political rhetoric. Misinformation takes advantage of institutional mistrust, as many later expressed feeling "confused" about which sources to believe. Critical thinking is frequently subordinated to the emotional attraction of such content. Even when false, misinformation is hard to ignore because it speaks directly to young people's fears, aspirations, and identities. Examples of this include political misinformation in Kenya, communal rumors in India, and dramatic faked numbers during Brexit.

Critical thinking is frequently subordinated to the emotional attraction of such content. Even when false, misinformation is hard to ignore because it speaks directly to young people's fears, aspirations, and identities. Examples of this include political misinformation in Kenya, communal rumors in India, and dramatic faked numbers during Brexit. Fake news has far-reaching effects on the ethical and economic domains. Misinformation has the potential to destabilize markets and threaten important industries. Commonwealth countries that rely heavily on tourism, such as Fiji, the Seychelles, and Barbados, have seen a large number of reservations cancelled as a result of false and widely shared online allegations of natural disasters or social upheaval. Young WhatsApp users in Ghana propagated a rumor about tainted produce in 2020, which caused local market sales to decline for weeks before officials stepped in. Misinformation regarding vaccines made public health efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic extremely difficult in Commonwealth nations like South Africa and Pakistan, delaying economic recovery and putting further pressure on young employment and education. Constant exposure to divisive or deceptive content runs the ethical danger of normalizing negative communication standards, particularly among young people who are still forming their worldview. The Commonwealth Electoral Network has cautioned that youth populations in Nigeria, India, and the UK have been the subject of disinformation operations, which are frequently started by foreign actors. These tactics have stoked polarization and undermined democratic discourse.

The Commonwealth's responses to false information range greatly, influenced by variations in digital infrastructure, media systems, and governance capabilities. The Real411 platform, which was developed in South Africa with assistance from civil society, enables people, particularly young people, to report offensive online content. In India, fact-checking websites like BOOM and AltNews have grown to be vital resources for young people looking for clarification, particularly in times of crisis and election. Thousands of kids in Kenya have learned how to spot deceptive narratives and algorithmic manipulation thanks to youth-led programs like iHub's digital literacy seminars. Full Fact works with educational institutions in the UK to incorporate fact-checking instruction into the curriculum. Despite these efforts, false information spreads quickly—often more quickly than institutions can react. However, some of the most successful programs are grassroots in nature. While youth networks in the Caribbean maintain TikTok channels devoted to providing straightforward and interesting explanations of local political concerns, university students in Malaysia have formed social media clubs focused on refuting viral falsehoods among campus communities. A rising understanding that human trust is necessary for digital resilience, rather than merely automated moderation or regulatory compliance, is reflected in these community-based initiatives.

There are significant ramifications for the knowledge economy of the Commonwealth. A generation whose faith in science, institutions, or facts is undermined by false information is unacceptable for nations aspiring to create futures driven by innovation. For example, at a time when both countries are making significant investments in green technology, youth comprehension of scientific consensus has been impacted by climate change denial content circulating in Australia and Canada. Young job seekers in Kenya and India have been duped by false information about cryptocurrency scams,



financial chances, and employment initiatives, eroding their trust in digital economic opportunities. However, a knowledge-based society's foundations could be strengthened as a result of the crisis. Interest in critical thinking, digital literacy, and data ethics—skills crucial for the workforce of the future—has increased due to the growing awareness of false information. Young people have new job options in fields including information governance, digital safety, AI ethics, and fact-checking. With institutions like the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization (CTO) assisting smaller countries with limited resources to combat cyberthreats, Commonwealth cooperation has also strengthened.

For people throughout the Commonwealth, fake news poses both a serious threat and a significant opportunity. It raises social tensions, undermines trust, and destabilizes economies, but it also highlights pressing issues with digital governance, media environments, and educational institutions. Young people may take the lead in creating more resilient, knowledgeable, and democratic digital cultures if they are taught how to deal with false information not just technologically but also morally and analytically. How well this generation is equipped to challenge, analyze, and ethically distribute information in a complex digital world will determine the future of the Commonwealth's knowledge economy. In this way, fake news might lead to a new era of digital awareness, civic engagement, and intellectual fortitude throughout the Commonwealth, rather than just a crisis of trust.