Towards Protecting Youth from Mis- and Disinformation

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Abstract

This position paper highlights the need to include under-18 users to combat harmful online communication. Minors are vulnerable to and actively spread misinformation, especially on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. To address these risks, we advocate for (1) improved content detection, (2) interdisciplinary collaboration, and (3) youth-driven counter-narratives. Recognizing young users as key stakeholders is essential for building safer and more resilient digital spaces.

Introduction

Harmful online communication—such as misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech—has far-reaching effects on society, especially during political conflicts or crises. Underage users (minors under 18) are often overlooked in discussions about these online harms despite being highly active on social media and content-sharing platforms. In reality, younger users are both vulnerable targets and sometimes inadvertent participants in spreading harmful narratives. This position paper argues that any comprehensive strategy to tackle harmful online communication must explicitly include the experiences and behaviors of underage users. We outline why protecting and empowering younger audiences is crucial and how approaches like advanced content detection, interdisciplinary collaboration, and youth-focused counter-narratives can mitigate the spread of harmful content online.

Background

Young people today are immersed in digital environments where news and information are intermingled with entertainment. Many youth now rely on social media as a primary news source, often more than traditional media. For example, a recent European survey found 42% of people aged 16–30 get political news mainly from platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram (European Parliament 2025). The youngest in this group (16–18 years old) show a higher trust in TikTok and Instagram for news, whereas older youth lean towards Facebook or radio. This shift to fast-paced, user-generated content brings convenience but raises serious concerns: studies indicate that many young users struggle to distinguish misinformation from factual content. One report noted that 27% of TikTok users have trouble identifying misleading content, and a vast majority (76%) of young respondents encounter fake news at least weekly on their feeds. Constant sensational falsehoods online can increase anxiety and confusion among younger audiences, eroding their trust in institutions and discouraging civic participation (e.g. skipping elections or voting for a specific candidate "for the meme(s)") (Beran 2019). For example, children were exposed to vaccine misinformation in within minutes after signing up to TikTok (Cadier and Goldin 2023). In parallel, generative AI has emerged as a double-edged sword—offering creative tools and enabling the easy creation of deepfakes, AI-generated images, and synthetic media that blur the line between reality and fiction (Frank et al. 2024). False narratives can now be packaged in highly engaging formats: a manipulated video, a fake audio clip, or an AI-written post posted by a credible-looking profile. These developments amplify the risk of harmful online communication impacting youth, as tech-savvy teens may encounter or use—AI-generated content without always recognizing its inauthentic nature. Against this backdrop, under-18 users must be considered critical in online safety and dis- and misinformation discussions. Notably, adolescents report frequent encounters with "fake news" online and employ coping strategies—some teens deliberately ignore content they suspect is false or use platform tools like block and report (Tamboer et al. 2024). While such self-regulation is encouraging, it's not a silver bullet. For instance, ignoring misinformation might prevent one teen from believing it, but it doesn't stop the viral spread to thousands of others as the viewers add to the impression and view count of a short video. Moreover, younger users often overestimate their ability to spot falsehoods, which can lead to overconfidence and reduced vigilance (Tamboer, Kleemans, and Daalmans 2022). All these factors make clear that minors are not only passive victims but also active agents in the online information ecosystem. Therefore, any solution to harmful online communication must account for younger users—addressing their vulnerabilities, harnessing their strengths, and guiding their participation toward positive outcomes (Hopelab 2024).

Positions

Our position is that strategies to combat harmful online communication should explicitly integrate younger users into the problem analysis and the solution design. Efforts to detect, mitigate, and counter harmful content must extend to the platforms and contexts popular with teens, and involve stakeholders from education and youth communities. We argue that under-18 users require targeted protection from online harms and opportunities to act as informed digital citizens rather than unwitting amplifiers of false narratives (Sharevski and Vander Loop 2024). Furthermore, children in their early childhood (0-6 years) and middle childhood (7-10 years) are a special group because their parents, guardians, or educators might use applications with specific implications for them (Ali et al. 2020; Gruber et al. 2022). Especially these caregivers are at risk of specific harmful online communication regarding children. If they are affected by mis/disinformation, this also affects the children even though they are not directly exposed to it (Howard et al. 2021). Therefore, our position is grounded in a multi-faceted approach: First, we need improved real-time detection and moderation for children. We should advance the technical tools and policies for early detection of harmful content (misinformation, hate, etc.), especially on youth-centric platforms, while accounting for new challenges like generative AI and influencers that spread misinformation. Second, disciplines must collaborate over disciplinary boundaries. Tech companies, educators, parents, and social scientists should cooperate more closely to address the socio-technical aspects of online harms to adolescents and children. This includes school digital literacy programs, mental health support, and platform policies developed with child psychology and ethics in mind. This might also include to strengthen age restrictions on social media. Lastly, we must find ways to create and distribute counternarratives. This encourages and amplifies counternarratives that appeal to younger audiences. We can turn the tide on misinformation by promoting truthful content and critical thinking. By involving youth in creating and sharing factual, compelling stories (especially during crises), we can leverage peer influence to debunk falsehoods and reduce the spread of harmful content. In summary, we argue for an inclusive approach: protect youth from harmful online communication and empower youth to be part of the solution.

Arguments

This section outlines different arguments for protecting and empowering underage users in the first part and presents counterarguments in the second part.

Detection and Moderation in Youth Spaces In the fight against harmful online content, detection and content moderation systems are the first line of defense. These systems must adapt to the platforms and behaviors of younger users. Many under-18s consume news and viral stories on apps like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, so detection efforts must be as robust as on traditional sites. However, recent events suggest the current measures are falling short. During Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for example, TikTok became flooded with videos—many of the most popular ones were false or misleading. Old conflict footage, movie scenes, and video game clips were presented as live from Ukraine. These clips spread to millions of viewers (often teens) before they could be verified (Primig, Szabó, and Lacasa 2023). Bosch et al. found that on a fresh TikTok account, it took under an hour of watching war-related videos for the feed to fill with misinformation without any warnings or fact-check labels provided by the platform (Bösch and Divon 2024). Such findings highlight a dangerous gap: harmful content aimed at or encountered by young users can easily slip through the filters of social media platforms. To address this, our position emphasizes improving detection tools and moderation policies, specifically in youth-dominated online spaces. Something unlikely to happen at US platforms, given the current direction of social media companies removing their collaboration with fact-checking and moderation (Meta Inc. 2025b; X Inc. 2025). Notably, TikTok and Meta announced it will automatically label AI-generated content and has introduced media literacy resources for users, developed in partnership with expert organizations (TikTok Inc. 2025; Meta Inc. 2025a). However, the effectiveness of such approaches remains to be seen. Both approaches work by attaching visible labels or warnings to suspect content and by using AI to flag potentially false or harmful posts. Platforms can slow the spread of toxic narratives before they do widespread damage if they choose to include these checks when a user posts content. Importantly, detection algorithms should be tuned to the formats favored by youth; for instance, meme images or short videos with text overlays might require specialized analysis and an understanding of how such videos are created (Bu et al. 2024). Companies can employ machine learning models to detect known misinformation (e.g., using databases of debunked rumors) and content provenance technology to spot manipulated media. In parallel, human moderators and fact-checkers must focus on trending topics in teen communities, whether conspiracy theories or dangerous challenges (e.g., eating Tide-Pods) circulating among the youths (Kriegel et al. 2021). In crisis or viral scenarios, the volume of posts increases, making moderation even more difficult. Still, proactive steps can be taken: for example, when graphic or written mis- or disinformation goes viral in a conflict, platforms might temporarily adjust recommendation algorithms to dampen unverified content. We've seen how algorithms optimized solely for engagement can inadvertently fuel misinformation. One study noted that false news spreads up to 10 times faster than accurate news on social media, often because outrageous stories provoke more reactions (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018). To counter this, detection systems could factor in content virality vs. credibility signals—flagging posts that spike in popularity but originate from dubious sources or have telltale signs of manipulation. In short, upgrading detection and moderation on youth-popular platforms can significantly reduce minors' exposure to harmful communication. It creates a safer digital environment where false or hateful content is identified and removed (or labeled) before it poisons young minds.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration for Youth Digital Safety Technical fixes alone are not enough. Equally important is an interdisciplinary collaboration that brings together technology experts, educators, psychologists, policymakers, and young users. Harmful online communication is a socio-technical problem involving human behavior, societal factors, and technology intertwined. Thus, our position advocates for collaborative efforts that address the content and context underage users encounter and react to that content. One key area for teenagers is digital literacy and education. Empowering teens with critical thinking skills can dramatically reduce the impact of misinformation. Instead of simply trying to shield youth from harm, which is impossible, collaboration between schools and tech platforms can help teens navigate digital content more safely. However, teachers often lack the necessary knowledge to educate teens about these topics. Some approaches, such as MisinfoDay at the University of Washington (Center for an Informed Public at UW 2025), bring high school students together to practice spotting fake images and misinformation. Such programs benefit from input across disciplines: journalists and fact-checkers teach verification skills, psychologists explain cognitive biases, and students engage through interactive workshops. We propose that social media companies support and partner with these educational efforts. TikTok's recent collaboration with MediaWise and other experts to create in-app literacy resources is a promising example (TikTok Inc. 2024). By working with educators and nonprofits, platforms can disseminate tips on recognizing false information and manipulative content where teens will see them (e.g., in their feeds and advertisements). Beyond education, policy collaboration is needed. Collaboration with psychologists and sociologists can inform how harmful content affects adolescent mental health and social behavior, ensuring responses are developmentally appropriate. Cross-industry partnerships are also valuable: multiple social media companies could share data about emerging harmful trends that mainly affect minors (while respecting privacy) to coordinate a response over different platforms. During fast-moving crises, be it a war, a pandemic, or social unrest, such information sharing can help all platforms tamp down dangerous misinformation targeting kids and teens. Another collaborative approach is engaging parents and guardians as allies. Parents often struggle to know what content their children consume and lack the skills to review it critically. Workshops or community outreach can teach parents about the latest online challenges (e.g., extremist propaganda or health misinformation circulating among teens). Schools, mental health professionals, and tech firms can collaborate to guide guardians in fostering open conversations and resilience in their children's digital lives. Crucially, young people themselves should have a voice in these collaborations. Teens could serve on youth advisory councils for social media platforms or research projects, offering insights into how they use technology and what strategies might effectively reach them. By breaking silos between disciplines and stakeholders, we can create a holistic network of support for young Internet users. This network would aim not to lock youth out of online spaces but to make those spaces more innovative and more supportive of healthy engagement.

Counter-Narratives and Youth Empowerment Finally, an effective response to harmful online communication must include the promotion of counter-narratives – truthful, constructive content that can challenge and drown out misinformation and hate. In this regard, younger users should be seen not only as potential victims but also as messengers. Teens and children are often highly creative with online expression; if guided correctly, they can produce engaging content that debunks myths or provides positive perspectives, resonating with their peers in ways traditional fact-checking might not. Counter-narratives are especially vital during political conflicts or crises, when false information is distributed exponentially. Consider again the example of the Ukraine war on TikTok. Alongside the misinformation on the platform, there were also young creators determined to share accurate information and personal stories from the conflict. Some Ukrainian TikTok users (many in their late teens or early 20s) made it their mission to broadcast the realities on the ground to global audiences. By posting videos of what was actually happening—sheltering during air raids, dispelling propaganda narratives—they provided authentic accounts that directly countered the falsehoods. These grassroots truth-tellers garnered massive engagement, with comment sections full of empathy and support, illustrating that factual narratives can gain traction. Their success underscores how peer voices often carry weight: a teenager is more likely to pay attention to content from someone their age who they relate to rather than an official source. Empowering young people to create and spread counter-narratives starts with providing the right tools and knowledge. This ties back to digital literacy—teaching youth to fact-check claims and encouraging a habit of questioning sources. However, it also involves amplifying youth voices on social media platforms. Partnerships with popular young influencers or content creators can further amplify corrective messages. Imagine a famous teen YouTuber or TikTok creator teaming up with a fact-check organization to produce short, catchy videos that set the record straight on trending rumors. Such collaborations merge entertainment with education, making the truth go viral in a format that appeals to under-18 audiences. Counter-narratives are not just about correcting facts; they also offer alternative narratives that fulfill the same emotional or social needs that drive misinformation. If teens are sharing a sensational conspiracy because it gives them a sense of thrill or community, a counter-narrative approach might provide engaging true stories or myth-busting challenges that appeal to that same desire. For example, instead of just saying "X is false," a counter-narrative might invite young users to participate in an interactive quiz or game that rewards them for spotting the logical flaw in X, turning the debunking into a fun activity. This method can neutralize the allure of the original false content. Moreover, positive storytelling can combat hate speech or extremist narratives that prey on young minds—stories of solidarity, inclusivity, and real accounts from those affected can humanize issues and make it harder for harmful propaganda to take root. In implementing counter-narratives, generative

AI can be an ally as well. The same technology used to create fake content can be used to create tailored, truthful content. For instance, AI chatbots could generate personalized, age-appropriate explanations when a teen encounters a piece of misinformation—offering context and correction in a friendly tone. AI tools might also help produce imagery or videos that visually refute a false claim (for example, generating a clear diagram to debunk a fake science "hack" circulating on Instagram). However, the use of AI must be transparent and carefully managed to maintain credibility. Ultimately, counter-narratives can undermine harmful communication at its roots by involving youth in content creation and leveraging creative media strategies. This approach not only corrects falsehoods but also validates young users' role in shaping a healthier online discourse.

Counterarguments

While the need to include under-18 users in discussions of harmful online communication is strong, there are also counterarguments and challenges to our position:

Digital Natives Argument Some argue that today's youth are tech-savvy digital natives who can naturally discern misinformation, making additional protections unnecessary. It's true that Gen Z has grown up with the internet and often shows remarkable adaptability. Teens themselves report confidence in spotting "fake news" and many will simply scroll past content that seems phony or sensational (Selnes 2024). However, being comfortable with technology is not the same as being immune to deception. Studies reveal that young users get fooled or momentarily misled by false content — nearly a third of TikTok users struggle to identify misleading posts (European Parliament 2025). Moreover, cognitive biases affect young and old alike; a flashy or emotionally charged post can bypass critical thinking, especially if a peer shares it. Overconfidence can be perilous: a teen who believes they are too smart to fall for fake news might not double-check sources, inadvertently spreading a false story to friends. Thus, "digital native" or not, under-18 users benefit from safety nets like content moderation and literacy education. These measures are not about underestimating youth but acknowledging that everyone can be vulnerable to sophisticated misinformation tactics or manipulation (such as deepfake videos that look extremely real).

Age Restriction/Ban Argument Another counterargument posits that the simplest solution is to keep minors off harmful platforms altogether. If under-18 users are vulnerable online, why not ban them from social media or require strict age verification to access certain content? In theory, such restrictions aim to shield kids from harm. In practice, they are difficult to enforce and can backfire for example when it comes to privacy (Kang, Shin, and Huang 2022). Attempts to impose blanket social media bans on youth often stem from political and parental anxieties, but experts label these approaches as "moral panics" unsupported by research. Tech-savvy teens frequently find ways around age gates (using fake birthdays, borrowed accounts, etc.), so dangerous content may just go underground (Yardi and Bruckman 2011). More importantly, heavy-handed restrictions overlook the core need for digital literacy and self-regulation skills (Wisniewski, Vitak, and Hartikainen 2022). No amount of external filtering can replace a young person's ability to recognize and resist harmful content. Indeed, focusing solely on bans could do more harm than good by creating a false sense of security and diverting attention from education. There are also privacy concerns with stringent age verification, which might require collecting sensitive data on minors. Our position isn't to give kids unfettered access to anything online—reasonable age-appropriate content policies are needed. But outright bans are a blunt instrument that ignores the nuance of how youth engage online and the positive opportunities for learning and connection that would be lost. A more balanced approach is empowering young users to handle online challenges.

Focus on Adult Harms First Some might contend that adults are the primary drivers and targets of political misinformation and harmful content, so interventions should prioritize grown-up audiences. Compared to adults, minors have less political power (most can't vote) and perhaps a smaller role in spreading fake news at scale. It's correct that older demographics have also been identified as superspreaders of misinformation in certain contexts (studies of past elections found older adults shared false news links at higher rates). However, the online ecosystem is intergenerational and interconnected. Youth may not vote yet, but their political socialization is happening now. Beliefs formed or reinforced in one's teens can shape one's worldview and civic behavior for years to come (Fletcher and López-Pérez 2022). Additionally, under-18 users have influence within their families and communities; a misinformed teen might inadvertently pass on false narratives to parents, teachers, or siblings, further entangling with adult discourse. From a resilience standpoint, it is more effective to inoculate young people early against misinformation than to try and debunk deeply ingrained false beliefs later in life. Also, harmful communication isn't limited to politics—think of health hoaxes or dangerous "challenges" that circulate among school-aged kids, which can lead to real-world harm (e.g. consuming unsafe substances or engaging in self-harm trends). These issues demand direct engagement with the youth population. In sum, protecting younger users is not a distraction from addressing adult issues; it's a complementary strategy that ensures the next generation grows up smarter and more resistant to harmful online communication, which benefits society at large.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the digital world's complexities cannot be fully addressed without acknowledging and involving its youngest participants. Under-18 users are on the front lines of social media and online forums where harmful communication can thrive. They witness the rapid-fire spread of rumors during crises, feel the sting of hateful messages, and sometimes, unknowingly, help false information go viral with a single click. Any position that seeks to combat harmful online communication must therefore broaden its scope to include these younger users — not as an afterthought, but as a central consideration.

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Ethics Checklist

1. For most authors...
   (a) Would answering this research question advance science without violating social contracts, such as violating privacy norms, perpetuating unfair profiling, exacerbating the socio-economic divide, or implying disrespect to societies or cultures? Yes, our position paper is not violating any of the above
   (b) Do your main claims in the abstract and introduction accurately reflect the paper's contributions and scope? Yes, they do reflect that
   (c) Do you clarify how the proposed methodological approach is appropriate for the claims made? As this is a position paper we do not have a methodology but we elaborate on a position
   (d) Do you clarify what are possible artifacts in the data used, given population-specific distributions? We did not use any primary data that we recorded ourselves. All other datasets are cited e.g., by the European Parliament
   (e) Did you describe the limitations of your work? We give counterarguments for our positions
   (f) Did you discuss any potential negative societal impacts of your work? We discussed, that especially AI can be used to safeguard but also to sow distrust
   (g) Did you discuss any potential misuse of your work? Since this is a position paper, we do not believe that this can be misused
   (h) Did you describe steps taken to prevent or mitigate potential negative outcomes of the research, such as data and model documentation, data anonymization, responsible release, access control, and the reproducibility of findings? Since this is a position paper we cannot do data anonymization
   (i) Have you read the ethics review guidelines and ensured that your paper conforms to them? Yes we read them

   Our work did not include or ran any other experiments that are mentioned by the remainder of the ethics checklist.