

Summary of the report: Youth information literacy in the age of AI

Introduction

The report explores how young people aged 13-28 search, evaluate and process information in a digital age characterised by new technologies such as artificial intelligence. The aim is to shed light on their strengths, challenges and potential - based on qualitative studies and interviews. In this specific context, information literacy is defined as the ability to search for information purposefully, critically assess its credibility and process it for independent dissemination.

Methodology

The study is based on a mobile ethnographic study as well as qualitative interviews and focus groups consisting of young people aged 13-28. The mobile ethnography followed young people in their everyday and school life, continuously documenting their information search and reflections. This effort provided insight into how information literacy plays out in practice rather than just in theory. The data collected was supplemented by interviews and focus groups where the participants had the opportunity to elaborate on their experiences and points of view. The study covers three levels of education - primary, secondary and higher education - giving a broad picture of similarities and differences in information practices across various age groups and contexts.

Information search

Most young people consider themselves to be good at finding information, mainly because they can quickly localise answers. Google is almost universally considered the preferred access point. Their search strategies may seem well thought out, but in practice, their searches are often superficial. Young people mainly use the top search results without systematically exploring any alternatives. This gives them useful but relatively random results prioritising accessibility over thoroughness.

Other sources are used to a lesser extent: digital learning platforms at lower educational levels, books and scientific articles among students. However, many find that the time constraints favour quick online searches over immersion in books. The use of AI tools is still limited and characterised by a certain degree of uncertainty. Many

have ethical concerns about whether its use equals 'cheating' but also recognise its potential for inspiration and its value as an aid in the search for information.

Source criticism

The participants' self-assessment is generally positive: they believe that they can assess the credibility of information. Yet, the study reveals significant challenges. Many rely too much on the first source without systematically fact-checking. Some young people are able to recognise AI-generated images or linguistically biased texts but often value subjective language over factual evidence.

Across educational levels, different challenges are highlighted:

- Upper secondary school: Awareness of shortcomings, but with the expectation that source criticism will come with age.
- Youth education: Finding source criticism difficult, especially in the age of AI and chatbots that increase complexity.
- Higher education: Particularly struggles to decode the quality of academic articles, often in English and in academic language.

There is no guarantee of progression through the educational system; the challenges identified by young people simply change in nature.

Information processing

When processing information, young people often navigate by clear text signals such as headings and subheadings. This helps them to quickly identify key points but also results in textual representations that border on transcription rather than independent dissemination. Few are able to paraphrase or synthesise points in an independent manner.

Young people's own assessments and wishes

Chapter two of the report gives young people a voice to express how they believe their information skills can be improved and what it takes for them to find the topic relevant and motivating.

Young people emphasise four things in particular:

1. Training needs: They realise that they lack skills, especially in the fields of source criticism and independent processing of information. However, they do see learning as a process that requires repetition and progression rather than one-off lessons.

2. Motivation through relevance: Many find information literacy boring if it is not directly related to their tasks or interests. Relevance and practical application are key.
3. Practical and interactive methods: They prefer hands-on exercises, group work and situations where they actively participate rather than passive teaching.
4. Professional legitimacy: Young people want to be taught by people they perceive as experts in information search. Teachers have a big influence on their attitudes towards things like AI. On the other hand, most people don't see librarians as relevant experts.

Overall, the chapter shows that young people are both aware of their challenges and open to learning - but only if learning makes sense in their everyday lives and is delivered in an engaging and credible way.

Conclusion

The report paints a picture of a generation of young people who are fast and confident information seekers but lack depth as well as critical thinking and reflection skills in their use of information. AI tools are an area of great potential but characterised by uncertainty and moral concerns.

Across educational levels, there are both common challenges and level-specific barriers. Overall, the report points to a need for systematic and relevant information literacy education where young people are actively engaged and where professionals with legitimacy lead the process. If successful, information literacy may become a strength for both young people's educational pursuits and their participation as informed citizens in a digital democracy.