

Rationale and Overview

With the sudden explosion of digital media content and information access devices in the last generation, there is now more information available to more people from more sources than at any other time in human history. Pockets of limited access by geography or status notwithstanding, people now have ready access to almost inconceivably vast information repositories that are increasingly portable, accessible, and interactive in both delivery and formation. One result of this contemporary media landscape is that there exist incredible opportunities for learning, social connection, and individual enhancement in a wide variety of forms.

At the same time, however, the origin of information, its quality, and its veracity are in many cases less clear than ever before, resulting in an unparalleled burden on individuals to find appropriate information and assess its meaning and relevance. Moreover, wide-scale access to information and the multiplicity of available sources also make it extremely complex to assess the credibility of information accurately. And yet, it is also highly consequential, since not having the skills to

accurately assess the credibility of information can have serious social, personal, educational, relational, health, and financial consequences in today's networked world.

While this is true for all users of digital media, youth are a particularly intriguing group to consider with regard to credibility because of the tension between their technical and social immersion with digital media and their relatively limited development and lived experience compared to adults. On the one hand, those who have literally grown up in an environment saturated with networked digital media technologies may be highly skilled in their use of media to access, consume, and generate information. This suggests that in light of their special relationship to digital tools, youth are especially well positioned to navigate the complex media environment successfully. Indeed, forms of credibility assessment that rely on information to be spread efficiently through social networks highlight some intriguing advantages for youth populations, who are often extremely interconnected compared to adults. In such instances, younger users may actually be better equipped than adults to transmit information pertaining to an entity's credibility quickly and efficiently via their social networks.

On the other hand, youth can be viewed as inhibited in terms of their cognitive and emotional development, life experiences, and familiarity with the media apparatus. This perspective suggests that although youth may be talented and comfortable users of technology, they may lack critical tools and abilities that enable them to seek and evaluate information effectively. Children's relative lack of life experience, for instance, may put them at greater risk than adults for falsely

accepting a source's self-asserted credibility, since such assessments are based on accumulated personal experience, knowledge, reputation, and examination of competing resources. As a group, youth have fewer life experiences to which they might compare information than do most adults. In addition, youth may not have the same level of experience with or knowledge about media institutions, which might make it difficult for them to understand differences in editorial standards across various media channels and outlets compared to adults who grew up in a world with fewer channels and less media convergence. As a consequence, some youth may not have the same level of skepticism toward digital media or particular sources as adults do, because these media are not seen as "new" to younger users who cannot remember a time without them.

Although a good deal of scientific knowledge is accruing with regard to how people determine the credibility of information they get via digital media, extremely little of this work has focused on children. This is surprising, given the unique relationship of contemporary youth to media technology. We know, for example, that youth are more likely than adults to turn to digital media first when researching a topic for school or personal use; they are more likely to read news on the Internet than in a printed newspaper; and they are more likely to use online social networking tools to meet friends and to find information. In other words, the primary sources of information in their world are often digital, which is quite different from any prior generation.

Indeed, many have noted that their special relationship to digital media impacts the way youth approach learning and

research. As the first generation to grow up with the Internet, young people are comfortable collaborating and sharing information via digital networks, and do so “in ways that allow them to act quickly and without top-down direction” (Rainie 2006, 7). Moreover, the interactivity afforded by networked digital media allows young people to play the roles of both information source and receiver simultaneously as they critique, alter, remix, and share content in an almost conversational manner using digital tools. These realities, we believe, have profound implications for how young people both construct and assess credibility online.

Despite these complex realities, examinations of youth and digital media have often been somewhat simplistic, focusing for example on the popular generation gap caricature, where youth are portrayed as either technologically adept compared to adults or as utterly vulnerable and defenseless. Such considerations fail to focus on the most important and enduring by-products of heavy reliance on digital media: the impact of “growing up digital” (Tapscott 1997) is that more and more of the information that drives our daily lives is provided, assembled, filtered, and presented by sources that are largely unknown to us, or known to us in nontraditional ways. Yet, we have only begun to explore what this means for younger users who are not only immersed in digital media now but will be for the entirety of their lives.

To address these issues, this project provides a comprehensive look at kids and online information credibility, using a large-scale survey of children in the United States, ages 11 to 18. The research reported here fills the current void in knowledge about how youth seek information and assess credibility using

many types of digital media. In the face of increasing disintermediation and media complexity, the practical application of such knowledge could be employed to empower users to reap the benefits of the vast digital information environment while minimizing the risks of relying on information that may be misleading, incomplete, or wholly inaccurate. Overall, data from this survey constitute the first systematic study of youth designed to assess their information-seeking strategies and beliefs across a wide variety of media and information types. As such, our findings offer unprecedented insight into how young people think about credibility today.

Findings from this study can be used to inform parents, educators, and policy makers interested in digital literacy, and to understand the complex realities of children's relationship to digital media and the information they glean from them.