

## Executive Summary

The enormous amount and variety of information currently available to people online present both tremendous opportunities and serious challenges. Readily available Web-based resources provide extraordinary promise for learning, social connection, and individual enrichment in a wide variety of forms. Yet, the availability of vast information resources also makes the origin of information, its quality, and its veracity less clear than ever before, resulting in an unparalleled burden on individuals to accurately assess information credibility.

Contemporary youth are a particularly intriguing and important 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 life experience compared to adults. Although those who have grown up in an environment saturated with networked digital media technologies may be highly skilled in their use of media, they are also inhibited by their cognitive and emotional development, personal experiences, and familiarity with the media apparatus.

Despite these complex realities, examinations of youth and digital media to date have typically been somewhat simplistic. To provide a comprehensive look at children and online information credibility, this project employed a large-scale, Web-based survey of a representative sample of 2,747 children with Internet access in the United States, ages 11 to 18. In addition, one parent of each child was surveyed to obtain household indicators of digital media use, parental involvement, and various demographic factors.

Findings from this project constitute the first systematic survey of youth designed to assess their information-seeking strategies and beliefs across a wide variety of media and information types. As such, findings can be used to inform parents, educators, and policy makers interested in digital literacy and to understand the realities of children's relationship to digital media and the information they glean from such media.

Key findings of this project can be organized in terms of children's Internet usage, their perceptions of information credibility and factors affecting these perceptions, child/parent dyads and credibility assessments, and Web site exposure and evaluation.

Regarding children's Internet usage:

- The vast majority of children began using the Internet between second and sixth grades, with a majority of kids online by third grade. Nearly all kids (97 percent) are online by the eighth grade. Children use the Internet (not including email) for an average of almost 14 hours per week, and usage generally increases with age, from an average of 8 hours weekly among 11-year-olds to 16 hours per week for 18-year-olds.

- Overall, children rely fairly heavily on the Internet. The most important general uses include social networking, virtual usage (i.e., gaming and the like), information contribution in various forms (e.g., sharing files with others or creating personal Web sites, blogs, or journals), and commercial use (which is not very common among children). Although children generally acknowledge that information overabundance might pose a problem for them, nearly two-thirds of children report that their life would be either a little or much worse overall if they could not go online again, which is more pronounced with age.
- Children believe that they are highly skilled Internet users. Even 11-year-olds believe that their technical skill, search skill, and knowledge about Internet trends and features are higher than other Internet users.
- Seventy-five percent of parents control their child's access and use of the Internet by placing the computer in a certain location in the home, limiting the sites their child can visit, limiting the amount of time their child can go online, or controlling their children's Internet access in other ways. Parental oversight of children's online activities decreases as kids get older, with each method of control reported about half as frequently by parents of older children compared to parents of younger children.

Regarding children's perceptions of information credibility:

- Young people are concerned about credibility on the Internet, yet they find online information to be reasonably credible, with 89 percent reporting that "some" to "a lot" of information online is believable. While the amount of information they find

credible increases with age somewhat, their concern about credibility does not.

- Their concern about credibility could stem from the fact that 73 percent of children have received some form of information literacy training, and the majority of parents report that they talk to their kids about whether to trust Internet information.
- A third of children reported that they, or someone they know, had a bad experience due to false information found on the Internet or through email. In addition, nearly two-thirds said that they had heard a news report about someone who had a bad experience because of false information online. These experiences affect how skeptical kids are of Internet information.
- Among several options, the Internet was rated as the most believable source of information for schoolwork, entertainment, and commercial information, as well as second most believable source for health information and third most believable for news information. Notably, children report that the Internet is a more credible source of information for school papers or projects than books.
- Kids are not very trusting of blogs, but they do find *Wikipedia* to be somewhat believable. Many children report believing information on *Wikipedia* substantially more than they think other people should believe it.
- Young people are appropriately skeptical of trusting strangers or people they meet online and are decidedly more trusting of people they meet in person.
- Children differentiate in reasonable ways among entertainment, health, news, commercial, and school-related informa-

tion online when deciding which credibility assessment tools to use and with how much effort to employ them. Although this is generally encouraging, children also report finding entertainment and health information to be equally believable online, suggesting a suboptimal degree of skepticism between these diverse information types that have potentially quite different consequences.

- Older kids also show greater diversity and rigor in assessing the credibility of online information. Moreover, young people who are less analytic in their processing of information report trusting strangers online more and are more likely to be fooled by false information online.
- Children's concerns about credibility appear to be driven largely by analytic credibility evaluation processes, which involve the effortful and deliberate consideration of information. By contrast, actual beliefs about the credibility of information they find are dictated by more heuristic processes, by which decisions are made with less cognitive effort and scrutiny. This suggests that while most kids take the idea that they should be concerned about credibility seriously (by invoking a systematic and analytical approach), many also exhibit a less rigorous approach to actually evaluating the information they find online.
- There was no clear evidence of a "digital divide" in terms of the credibility beliefs and evaluations of kids from different demographic backgrounds. Instead, the rigor with which kids evaluate information they find online drives much of their credibility beliefs and concerns.

Regarding child/parent dyads and credibility assessments:

- Parents believe they are more adept at assessing credibility online than their children, and children almost universally share this assessment. This is particularly pronounced for younger children. However, the gap between parents and their children in this regard narrows with age.
- Children and adults both demonstrate an optimistic bias in their ability to identify credible information when compared to “typical” Internet users, indicating that they believe they are better equipped to discern information credibility than the average user. This is true even among children as young as 11 years old.

Regarding children’s Web site exposure and evaluation:

- A majority of children displayed an appropriate level of skepticism when presented with hoax Web sites, a trend that contradicts prior research about this type of site. Nonetheless, approximately 10 percent of children still believed hoax sites either “a lot” or “a whole lot,” indicating some lingering and important concerns.
- Children found encyclopedia entries that they believed originated from *Encyclopedia Britannica* to be significantly more believable than those they believed originated from either *Wikipedia* or *Citizendium*.
- The actual source of an online encyclopedia entry (i.e., taken from *Wikipedia*, *Citizendium*, or *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) was irrelevant to how credible the entry was found to be by children. However, encyclopedia entries were assessed as less believable when placed on *Wikipedia’s* site than when they were

placed on the other sites. In addition, entries actually originating from *Wikipedia* were perceived as more believable when they appeared on *Citizendium's* web page than if they appeared on *Wikipedia's* page, and even more believable if they appeared to have originated from *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Thus, ironically, while children find the content of *Wikipedia* to be most credible, they find the context of *Wikipedia* as an information resource to be relatively low in credibility.

- Children largely found product ratings to be credible and important to their assessments of commercial information. Average product ratings were significantly more influential than the number of ratings the product received, and there was some evidence that older children in particular were influenced slightly by the combination of average ratings and the number of ratings considered together.

Overall, this project provides a comprehensive investigation into youth's Internet use and their assessment of the credibility of online information. The findings—which are generalizable to households in the United States with Internet access—represent the current state of knowledge on this topic and serve as an important springboard for future research.

