Chapter 9
The Special Case of Youth and Digital Information Credibility

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ABSTRACT
The vast amount of information available online makes the origin of information, its quality, and its veracity less clear than ever before, shifting the burden on individual users to assess information credibility. Contemporary youth are a particularly important group to consider with regard to credibility issues because of the tension between their technical and social immersion with digital media, and their relatively limited development and life experience compared to adults (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). Although children may be highly skilled in their use of digital media, they may be inhibited in terms of their ability to discern quality online information due to their level of cognitive and emotional development, personal experience, or familiarity with the media apparatus compared to adults. This chapter presents the findings of a large-scale survey of children in the U.S. ages 11-18 years examining young people’s beliefs about the credibility of information available online, and the strategies they use to evaluate it. Findings from the study inform theoretical, practical, and policy considerations in relation to children’s digital literacy skills concerning credibility evaluation.

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YOUTH AND DIGITAL INFORMATION CREDIBILITY

With the sudden explosion of digital media content and information access devices in the last two decades, there is now more information available to more people from more sources than at any other time in human history. Most people in the developed world today 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 exists incredible opportunities for learning, social connection, and individual enhancement via the vast information resources made available by networked digital media.
However, information’s origin, quality, and veracity are in many cases less clear than ever before, creating an unparalleled burden on individuals to find appropriate information and assess its meaning and relevance (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). Access to the tremendous number and range of available sources makes accurately assessing information credibility extremely challenging and laborious. And existing research indicates that there may be reason to fear many individuals are not up to the task of credibility evaluation (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008; Kuiper & Volman, 2008; Metzger, 2007). Moreover, inaccurate credibility assessments can pose serious social, personal, educational, health, and financial risks (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008).

While this is true for all users of digital media, youth are a particularly intriguing group to consider with regard to information and source credibility, for several reasons. As Livingstone (2009) pointed out, children represent around one-fifth of the population in developed countries and studying the myriad ways that they combine multiple media, multitask, engage with each other online, and blur the boundaries between online and offline socialization could yield more insight into the future of media usage than studying adults alone. Not only is children’s digital media use behavior indicative of future trends, it also signals a potentially different relation to information gathering and evaluation in the future. Therefore, it is important to understand children’s online information evaluation today.

Children are also of interest due to the tension between their technical and social immersion with digital media and their relatively limited development and lived experience compared to adults (Eastin, 2008; Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). On one hand, as so-called “digital natives,” children have grown up in an environment saturated with networked digital media technologies (Palfrey & Glasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001) and thus may be highly skilled in their use of those 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 successfully navigate the complex contemporary media environment. Indeed, forms of credibility evaluation that rely on information to be spread efficiently through social networks suggest some intriguing advantages for younger populations, who are often more interconnected than adults (Jones & Fox, 2009; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickurh, 2010). For example, some argue that older children are better able to embrace networked publics than are adults because adults tend to find the “shifts brought on by networked publics to be confusing and disconcerting because they are more acutely aware of the ways in which their experiences with public life are changing” (boyd, 2011, p. 54).

On the other hand, youths can be viewed as limited in their cognitive and emotional development, life experiences, and familiarity with the media apparatus. Although children may be talented and comfortable users of technology, they may lack tools and abilities critical to effectively evaluate information (Eastin, 2008; Rowlands et al., 2008). For example, children have fewer benchmarks than adults to compare against information they find online or to discern the relative reputational cues across sources. In addition, children may not have the same level of experience with, or knowledge about, media institutions, which can make it difficult for them to understand differences in editorial standards across various media channels and outlets (e.g., traditional news media sources versus news blogs) compared to adults who grew up in a world with fewer channels and less media convergence (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). More generally, some youths may not be as critical of digital media or particular online information sources as adults because these media are not “new” to young people who cannot remember a time without them, and thus they do not apply the same level of skepticism toward digital media as do adults. Finally, many children, and especially very young children, often require assistance from