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Teaching Young People to Evaluate Information in the Digital Age

Developing Information Literacy Through Critical Thinking

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the importance of information literacy among young people in the digital age. It argues that easy access to information does not necessarily guarantee access to accurate or reliable information. Drawing on Media and Information Literacy, civic online reasoning, digital-literacy research, critical-thinking scholarship, and survey data from 100 young respondents in Uzbekistan, the article explores misinformation, critical thinking, fact-checking, verification habits, credibility judgments, and the role of education in preparing responsible digital citizens. Previous performance-based research shows that students can struggle to evaluate online claims, sources, and evidence, while research on professional fact-checkers demonstrates the value of lateral reading and cross-source verification. The present exploratory survey provides a complementary perspective by examining young respondents' self-reported information practices and perceived educational needs in Uzbekistan.
Keywords: Information literacy; Digital literacy; Critical thinking; Media literacy; Civic online reasoning; Fact-checking; Misinformation; Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Young people obtain information from social media, AI tools, websites, messaging platforms, and online communities. These technologies provide substantial educational opportunities, but they also expose learners to misinformation, manipulation, and persuasive content whose credibility may be difficult to judge. Therefore, schools and universities should equip students with practical skills for evaluating information critically rather than simply consuming it. The central concern of this article is not only whether young people can access information, but whether they can judge its credibility, compare sources, identify evidence, and make informed decisions.

The distinction between access and evaluation is particularly important in an information-rich environment. McGrew et al. (2018) describe civic online reasoning as the ability to effectively search for, evaluate, and verify social and political information online. Their assessment research found that students across educational levels struggled to evaluate online claims, sources, and evidence. This suggests that frequent exposure to digital information should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of strong information-evaluation skills.

At the same time, Wineburg and McGrew (2019) show that effective online evaluation involves specific practices rather than simply reading a webpage carefully. Their study of professional fact-checkers, historians, and university students identified lateral reading as an important expert practice: fact-checkers moved beyond the original webpage and consulted other sources to establish the credibility of the information.

Against this background, the present study explores information consumption, exposure to misleading information, cross-checking behaviour, credibility criteria, confidence in identifying misinformation, and perceived educational needs among 100 young respondents in Uzbekistan. The study is exploratory and does not claim to measure demonstrated online-evaluation competence. Instead, it provides a descriptive baseline of reported habits and needs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

3. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) provides a broad conceptual foundation for understanding how individuals access, analyse, evaluate, create, and communicate information. UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers presents MIL as a competence that can be integrated into formal teacher education and used to build learners' capacity to engage with an increasingly complex information environment (Wilson et al., 2011). Hobbs (2010) similarly frames digital and media literacy as a set of life skills that should be developed through formal and informal education. These approaches establish the broader educational principle that access to digital technologies should be accompanied by the ability to interpret and evaluate information critically.

Research on civic online reasoning makes this broad concept more specific by examining what people actually do when they encounter information online. McGrew et al. (2018) developed assessment tasks designed to measure students' ability to search for, evaluate, and verify social and political information online. Their final study included 894 learners across middle school, high school, and college levels, with participants drawn from educational settings in 12 U.S. states. Across the tasks and educational levels, students struggled to effectively evaluate online claims, sources, and evidence. The significance of this finding is that digital access and familiarity with online environments do not automatically produce the ability to judge information accurately.

Key Empirical Insight: Lateral Reading vs. Vertical Reading

While novice evaluators often read vertically (remaining on a single webpage to examine logos, domain extensions, and visual polish), professional fact-checkers read laterally. Fact-checkers quickly open new tabs to independently verify who is behind the claim and how external sources evaluate its credibility (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019).

McGrew et al. (2018) also provide an important methodological implication for the present study. Their research used performance-oriented tasks rather than relying only on participants' perceptions of their own skills. By contrast, the present Uzbekistan survey asks respondents to report how often they cross-check information, how confident they feel about identifying false information, and which credibility indicators they use. The two approaches should therefore not be treated as equivalent. The earlier performance-based evidence helps contextualise the present self-reported findings, while the present study contributes information about respondents' reported habits and perceived educational needs.

Wineburg and McGrew (2019) extend the discussion by examining how more experienced online evaluators establish credibility. Their expert/novice study involved 45 internet users: 10 Ph.D. historians, 10 professional fact-checkers, and 25 Stanford University undergraduates. Participants evaluated live websites and searched for information on social and political issues while thinking aloud. The researchers found an important difference between groups. Historians and students often remained within a webpage and relied on features such as official-looking logos and domain names when judging reliability. Professional fact-checkers, in contrast, tended to read laterally: after a quick scan of a webpage, they left it, opened other browser tabs, and searched for information that could establish the credibility of the original source.

Taken together, the literature suggests four connected points: digital access does not automatically produce strong evaluation skills; young people may struggle to evaluate online claims, sources, and evidence; effective evaluators use concrete verification practices such as lateral reading; and these practices can be addressed through education.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study uses a quantitative, descriptive online survey to examine how young respondents interact with digital information and how they perceive misinformation, verification, credibility, and media-literacy education. The study is exploratory and descriptive in scope.

Methodological Parameters & Scope

Sample Size: 100 participants
Sampling Strategy: Non-probability convenience sample
Instrument: 10-item Google Forms questionnaire
Target Population: Youth aged 18–35 in Uzbekistan
Data Collection: September 2026 (~10 days)
Primary Focus: Self-reported behaviors & educational demand

3.2 Participants and Procedure

The survey included 100 respondents aged 18–35 in Uzbekistan. Recruitment relied on accessible personal and social networks. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The questionnaire contained 10 researcherdeveloped questions covering demographics, internet usage, primary news platforms, misinformation encounters, cross-checking habits, credibility criteria, and educational demands

4. SURVEY FINDINGS

4.1 Demographic Profile and Digital Exposure

The dataset reports 32% aged 18–20, 21% aged 21–24, and 28% aged 25–29; respondents aged 30–35 were also included. University students represented 35% of the sample, followed by employed respondents at 27%.

Regarding daily internet use, 53% reported 1–3 hours and 32% reported 4–6 hours per day. **4.2 Summary of Key Survey Indicators**

Category	Survey Metric / Finding	Percentage / Distribution
Primary News Platforms	Telegram (Most frequent source)	80%
Secondary News Sources	YouTube / Instagram / Television	YouTube: 45% | Instagram: 42% | TV: 8%
Misinformation Encounters	Report encountering false/misleading news	Sometimes: 54% | Often: 14%
Verification Frequency	Scale 1–5 (3 = Moderate cross-checking)	32% selected Level 3
Credibility Criteria	Trust established news / Look for references	Established news: 58% | References: 41%
Perceived Causes of Vulnerability	Lack of media literacy / Social algorithms	Media literacy: 58% | Algorithms: 41%
Educational Demand	Support formal media-literacy courses	Definitely: 51% | Probably: 33% (Total: 84%)

4.3 Verification, Credibility, and Confidence

When asked how often they compare information with other sources before believing it (1–5 scale), 32% selected 3, suggesting moderate or inconsistent self-reported cross-checking. In assessing online credibility, 58% were most likely to trust information from established news organizations and 41% looked for supporting evidence or references. Self-assessed confidence in identifying fake news was concentrated around middle levels (37% selected level 3; 25% selected level 4). When asked about the main cause of vulnerability to false information, 58% selected lack of media literacy, 41% selected social-media algorithms, and 28% selected lack of time for verification.

5. DISCUSSION

The survey findings are broadly consistent with the literature showing that frequent exposure to digital information does not guarantee effective source evaluation. The reported reliance on established news organizations is encouraging, but moderate cross-checking suggests verification is not applied systematically. Wineburg and McGrew (2019) emphasize that the strategy of verification (e.g., lateral reading) is critical. A respondent may report "checking another source" without necessarily executing effective cross-verification.

6. EDUCATIONAL AND COMMUNITY IMPLICATIONS

The findings and literature support several practical directions. First, critical thinking, media literacy, and online source evaluation can be incorporated across subjects rather than confined to a single course. Second, students can be taught practical verification: identifying who is behind a source, comparing information across independent sources, examining supporting evidence, and practising lateral reading. Third, educational programmes can include realistic performance-based exercises. Fourth, schools, libraries, youth organisations, and community institutions can support responsible information consumption.

7. PROPOSED EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR UZBEKISTAN

The findings support a practical educational framework for strengthening information literacy among young people in Uzbekistan. Information literacy could be introduced systematically within secondary education, with age-appropriate instruction beginning around the fifth grade and continuing through upper secondary years.

Instruction should combine conceptual understanding with practical activities: identifying the original source of a claim; locating and comparing independent sources through lateral reading; examining evidence, references, authorship, and institutional credibility; verifying images, videos, and digitally circulated claims; and evaluating information produced or altered with artificial-intelligence tools.

8. JOURNALISTIC AND COMMUNITY IMPLICATIONS

Journalistic practice involves source evaluation, evidence assessment, contextualisation, and responsible presentation. In Uzbekistan, cooperation among journalists, schools, universities, libraries, youth organisations, and community institutions could support accessible media-literacy initiatives through teacher workshops, student sessions, public-awareness materials, and real-world verification demonstrations.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study connects international research on information evaluation with an exploratory account of young respondents' reported practices in Uzbekistan. Future research should move beyond self-reported confidence using performance-based evaluation tasks, larger and more diverse samples, and intervention studies testing lateral reading instruction.

10. CONCLUSION

Preparing young people for the digital information environment requires the ability to investigate claims, evaluate sources, compare evidence, and make justified judgments. The proposed educational framework combines systematic instruction with practical verification activities, emphasizing lateral reading and critical reflection.

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