OVERVIEW & SUMMARY

The Youth and Media team at the Berkman Center for Internet & Society hosted an invitation-only workshop on “Youth and Information Quality Online” as part of the DML Hub workshop series. The workshop focused on digital media and information quality issues in the youth context, including search, evaluation, creation, and dissemination practices of young Internet users.

The workshop’s first session was centered on insights from and discussion of the Berkman report entitled “Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality”. In the second session, participants explored youth-related information quality challenges in practice by discussing select applications and use cases across different contexts, including youths’ personal, social, and academic online contexts. Building on the report’s theoretical framework and insights gained from practice, the workshop closed with a moderated discussion about possible considerations and conclusions from educational and policy perspectives.

This report contains a summary of major discussion topics identified throughout the meetings’ sessions, and a list of open questions for going forward as raised by workshop participants.
WORKSHOP REPORT

I. Reflections on “Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality”
This section summarizes participants’ commentary on and responses to the report shared during the workshop’s first session. Two main themes connected and grounded the session’s discussion: how best to compare the information quality experiences of youth and adults, and how to fully account for the predominantly social character of youths’ usage of information.

1) Discussion of “Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality”
Participants’ reflections on the report ranged widely, highlighting its contributions to both research and practice, usefulness for identifying areas that warrant further development, and key ideas that need further elaboration. One prominent lens through which participants considered the report’s contributions and challenges is that of age – namely, how (well) does the framework apply when comparing youth to adults? Many trends in information behaviors, such as diminishing attention span and the use of both online and offline means and media for engaging with information, are fairly common among youth and adults, as researchers and practitioners across fields affirmed. Others, such as learning through play or blurring boundaries between private and public, may be more particular to young people. Homing in on the characteristics and behaviors unique to youth and adults, respectively, remains imperative. If we identify marked differences, then we can more explicitly address vulnerabilities particular to young people and their significance for the question of information quality more generally.

Additionally, participants suggested focusing on the predominantly social practice of information consumption and how that practice shapes information quality issues. Research cases from the social context have yielded relatively more insight into youth behaviors than those from the personal context. Nonetheless, some participants noted that the report could more fully account for the overlaps between online and offline, which are often social in nature. Youths’ learning strategies do not compartmentalize the online/offline and digital/analog as adults’ are wont to do. Conversation also looked to the report’s potential contributions to future research. For instance, although the report posits a process-oriented conceptual framework, the paper’s structure atomizes each stage of the process (search, evaluation, creation/dissemination). Future research can and should take on the task of operationalizing this process orientation.
II. Research, Practice, and Policy: Key Themes

This section presents central thematic areas identified over the course of the workshop. Inspired by “Youth and Digital Media: From Credibility to Information Quality”, workshop participants identified a series of topics that are considered to shape the quality experience of young users online. Core topics—some of which are cross-sectional in nature—include: the role of fair use, the existence of gender norms and disparities, participatory and democratic content creation, and adapting institutions to the new info-cology. In order to test the findings of the report in the context of practical examples, the workshop drew on PolicyMic.com, Millennial Youth Magazine, and Youth LAB as use cases.

1) Fair Use

Particularly for content creators, fair use is a central issue. Promoting and/or protecting fair use rights can facilitate youth content creation. However, many young people are unaware of fair use and therefore perceive their peers’ creative activities to be risky, and possibly illegal. This (mis)perception has implications for youth online activity; fearing legal repercussions, many young people are discouraged from participating in creative activities such as remixing copyrighted material. For those who carry on with remixing, misunderstanding or not knowing of fair use may lead content creators to fail to take the necessary steps to protect their work, such as giving attribution for source material or appealing a take-down notice on YouTube. Educating young people about fair use and providing them with associated skills may promote greater content creation (and potentially yield positive learning outcomes). By the same token, however, teaching strategies both formal and informal should be capable of facilitating content creation within the bounds of copyright law, as not all youth may be willing to take risks. In short, from an information quality perspective we find that risk can be an important factor of quality for creation and dissemination online.

2) Gender norms and disparity in content creation

Some participants suggested that gender disparities in participation and contribution in online user-generated content communities are noteworthy. To some extent, these disparities might reflect widening participation and/or attainment gaps in technology professions. Viewing this situation from the vantage point of the young technology user, participants with experience working with young media creators identified two discrete, but interconnected, challenges to participation: community norms and confidence.

Community norms condition how users share content, provide feedback, and exchange with each other, as well as how they moderate their exchanges. Such norms have implications for users’ safety and
communication. Communities in which harassing language or other biased and/or harmful actions discourage girls from contributing lack the norms that foster a safe and inviting environment for all. For this reason, spaces intended specifically for the participation of girls (or other demographics for whom there is need) may be more conducive to their participation. Alternatively, moderation can prove a useful mechanism for changing community norms tolerant of negative behaviors.

Harassment is not the online barrier to girls’ online content creation. The norms of some online communication spaces may reward masculine-normative behavior, thus discouraging girls from participating and expressing themselves openly. For instance, the team behind PolicyMic.com, a platform for user-generated news content, is seeking to encourage contributions on the part of women and girl users. Although women represent roughly half the site’s user base, they are significantly less likely to comment on news articles than men. Because PolicyMic uses a gamified system to reward users for their comments, this disparity disadvantages women and will lead to fewer women contributors of news content over time. Some of PolicyMic’s teenaged female writers indicate apprehension about being “flamed” by other users or about communicating with strangers online. Nonetheless, when they do contribute to PolicyMic, women produce better-researched and written articles than men. This suggests that women users of PolicyMic are less inclined to contribute in high volume, but more likely to contribute high quality content. This mirrors an issue with quality perceptions, confidence, and barriers to participation that other workshop participants encountered in the context of video production with girls. Girls may view most YouTube content as low quality and do not want their content associated with it. Such quality preferences may counter-intuitively inhibit their improvement, as contributing content to YouTube is vital to the confidence-building needed for skill development. Girls’ preferences for not associating their outputs with low quality content can be found in offline fora as well. Overall, we see that confidence is an important link between quality preferences and content creation.

3) Participatory and democratic content creation

Young Internet users face extrinsic and intrinsic barriers to entry, as discussed above. Intermediaries and content providers face challenges in the news/new media ecosystem as well, particularly that of meeting certain quality standards while also adapting new forms of content and curation to shifting conceptions of the quality of information.

PolicyMic.com exhibits one use case where solutions to this challenge are being tested. PolicyMic features a crowd-sourced and gamified system combined with editorial review to regulate the quality of
user-generated news articles and commentary. PolicyMic confronts issues such as the subjectivity of quality assessments, whereby one individual user may find a humorous article to be higher quality than one that is well researched. Potential ways to reflect the subjectivity and multiplicity of quality preferences range from structural solutions, such as including multiple quality metrics for rating articles, to norms-based solutions, such as promoting consensus on quality standards among users or enabling users to share research ideas with other authors. Some participants noted that the site could further test the dominant journalistic paradigm by allowing users to report original news.

In addition to experimenting with information quality online, PolicyMic also engages the challenge of harnessing youths’ propensity for content creation and dissemination for the news arena. Facebook’s popularity among young people and its potential for facilitating exchange about news among youth make it a key area for experimentation. Other media organizations draw youth into the news arena in different ways. Millennial Youth Magazine, a quarterly magazine that publishes, produces, and distributes youth content, and Youth LAB, a youth media project of Open Youth Networks, for instance, have worked with young people to develop procedural media production skills along with substantive and critical skills basic to news and media literacy. With Millennial Youth, the way young users and editors assess interest, relevance, and locality influence what gets published. However, the young news producers are also held to professional journalistic standards, which call for fact checking, using multiple firsthand sources, and other benchmarks to ensure credibility. Millennial Youth combines a traditional credibility framework with quality preferences that emerge through youth content creation and evaluation.

In the case of Youth LAB, a one-time project that virtually convened youth across borders to discuss and create media about issues in their communities, participation in shared media spaces—and experiences—was shown to be an important element of online exchange among youth. Play is an important element that can drive or motivate how youth participate in such experiences. The young participants in Youth LAB, for example, independently chose to create customized Google maps to visualize important community issues (such as family origins and environmental risks). Participation is a factor in information quality for youth when it comes to exchanging about society and politics online. Moreover, participation can benefit from skill development, but can also facilitate such development, which has important implications for learning in the new information ecosystem.

4) Adapting institutions to the new info-cology
As content creation communities, social networking sites, and youth practices are indicating significant shifts in learning, institutions are faced with questions of how to adapt. Educational institutions must consider how best to educate, especially now that informal and peer learning have shown much promise. Libraries and related information providers must learn from youth trends and processes to optimize new pathways to information. Perhaps less intuitively, but just as importantly, medical institutions must also respond to changes in learning, as the ways youth access health information through digital media may involve risks.

4.1) Schools and education

In the case of educational institutions, school and higher-level educational policy were subjects of sustained discussion. Many participants agreed that schools’ policies are often disconnected from youth behaviors and characterized by a “textbook mentality” (i.e., one-way delivery of self-contained information). This mentality is reflected in school policies that direct students to closed databases rather than Internet search engines or that block sites such as Facebook and YouTube, which one participant said is tantamount to disabling learning processes. We face challenges in “trusting” students while at the same time addressing safety concerns online, along with setting policy grounded in a cultural understanding of youths’ use of social media. Simply making information credible, good, or accurate might not be enough – schools should foster learning that is fun. Some participants offered reminders, though, that not all digital natives necessarily develop desired learning competencies on their own, and that gaming and play can be inappropriately or ineffectively applied.

Education policy set at levels above the school has the capacity to improve trends at the school level. Unlike policies set for individual institutions, however, education policy can more fully take into account the cultural values associated with digital media usage so as to promote broad changes. For instance, concerns about youths’ safety and privacy in digital (and especially social) media use often bleed over into concerns about information usage and corresponding rule-making. Many schools struggle to balance concerns about the spread of pornographic content or bullying behaviors over social networks and other online fora, yet neglect the fact that such spaces can facilitate learning about positive online participation, and more importantly, that learning to be a credible contributor of information may even alleviate perceived safety and privacy risks. Moreover, education policy can correct the view that digital natives seamlessly or naturally acquire desired competencies on their own, which is often inferred from observations of how large a role digital media play in digital natives’ lives.
4.2) Libraries
Libraries are being redesigned as vast, curated information systems. As such, understanding users’ learning processes as well as how users formulate quality preferences is critical. The Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), for instance, involves creating a national library that not only opens doors to and between diverse repositories of information, but which supports better pathways for accessing and using information. Libraries can build on the process orientation of the information quality framework to improve curation and information architecture for this end. With the process orientation, credibility is now situated in a process. In libraries, the overall process of search, interaction, collaborative evaluation, and sharing now matters most. The DPLA and other libraries can serve as intermediaries in a system where credibility becomes more of a process and libraries become clouds.

4.3) Medical and health institutions
The quality of health information found online is decidedly important, as misinformed actions can create risk. Young web users and educators should not be the only ones to grapple with this problem. Doctors should be both creating quality content and constantly adapting their understanding of what constitutes high quality health information for a patient. For instance, comparing an insightful patient blog post or active community health forum to a flawed medical association’s websites illustrates how medical institutions are no longer the sole purveyors of high quality health information accessible to the public. In short, our paradigms of health and medicine are changing with shifts in the production of health information. Medical professionals should collaborate with other fields to provide content and services that fully address users’ health information needs, such as those of patients, patients’ families, and others.

III. Open Questions for Moving Forward
This section lists open questions generated by workshop participants over the course of the day’s discussions. In particular, these questions are oriented towards future steps in research and practice that build off of the insights identified throughout the workshop, and are organized by themes that coalesced across multiple sessions: research areas and design, collaborations for data collection and application, and teaching and learning.

1) Research areas and design
- How can research design operationalize the holistic process of youths’ online activities—searching, evaluating, creating, and disseminating—posited in the information quality report? In
addition, how can such research design more fully account for youths’ connected online and offline practices?

- How can we learn more about parents’ influence on kids’ development of digital fluencies?
- How can we learn more about search and evaluation in the personal context?

2) Collaborations for data collection and application

- How can the vast amounts of data being collected by online corporations and organizations help facilitate research design or abet research in useful ways? For instance, how can data from entities like Google and Facebook be layered so as to shed light on the processes through which users engage in multiple online activities?
- Although the market is beginning to remove some obstacles to applying new stores of data to research, collaborations are still needed. How can collaborations across fields and sectors use data in novel ways?
- What might a usable database of web services or applications that generate quality standards through the crowd look like? How could such a resource be useful?
- How can shared insights from different contexts inform what it means to be consumers, curators, and creators of information more generally?

3) Teaching and learning

- Does the new media environment present opportunities to truly tailor education, teaching, and curricula to all individual learners?
- What are the promises and potential pitfalls of using games and play for learning? Although it is appealing to extrapolate gaming mechanics to learning, how do we assess whether doing so is appropriate?
- What can be learned from crowd-sourced, market-driven projects about the role of incentives creating learning experiences and shaping quality preferences online?
- Quite generally, how do we measure learning across multiple contexts? More specifically, how do we assess interventions that aim to improve metacognition, or youths’ awareness of their online information practices?
- How do we combine the best learning resources with the best instructional tools?