AI Literacy for Citizen Participation

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In a French classroom, half the students are using ChatGPT to complete their assignments, while their teachers struggle to distinguish human writing from machine-generated text. Across the Atlantic, school districts implement AI detection tools that falsely accuse non-native English speakers of cheating at disproportionate rates. In Colombia, parents discover their children's images have been manipulated by generative AI to create disturbing content. These scenarios, documented in [9], reveal the urgent need to understand what we mean by "AI literacy" and who gets to define it.

[9] ENQUETE. "La moitié de la classe utilise ChatGPT" : comment l ...

The very concept of AI literacy has become a battlefield where competing visions of technological citizenship clash. While frameworks proliferate and guidelines multiply, a fundamental question remains unresolved: are we teaching people to be competent users of AI tools, critical evaluators of algorithmic systems, or empowered participants in democratic decisions about artificial intelligence? The answer shapes not just educational curricula but the future of democratic participation itself.

The Tripartite Model and Its Discontents

The dominant framework for AI literacy rests on three pillars: understanding, evaluating, and using AI technologies. This tripartite model, extensively detailed in [5], appears comprehensive on its surface. Students should understand how AI works, evaluate its outputs and implications, and use it responsibly. Yet this neat categorization masks deep tensions about what each component actually entails.

[5] AI Literacy: A Framework to Understand, Evaluate, and Use Emerging ...

Understanding AI, in most implementations, means grasping basic concepts like machine learning, neural networks, and algorithmic decision-making. But whose understanding counts? The technical explanations favored by computer scientists differ markedly from the lived experiences of communities subjected to algorithmic surveillance. As [6] documents, students in schools with AI-powered security systems develop a visceral understanding of algorithmic power that no textbook can convey—yet this experiential knowledge rarely appears in formal literacy frameworks.

[6] AI Surveillance in Schools: Digital Safety or Digital Overreach?

The evaluation component proves equally contested. While [11] advocates for teaching students to assess AI systems for bias and fairness, the tools for such evaluation often remain in the hands of technical experts. The framework assumes a level of transparency and access that simply doesn't exist for most AI systems. Students can learn to ask critical questions about bias, but when algorithms remain black boxes protected by corporate secrecy, evaluation becomes an exercise in educated guesswork.

[11] Inclusive AI Literacy in Business Education | AACSB

Using AI responsibly presents perhaps the thorniest challenge. Responsible use means different things to different stakeholders. For educators worried about academic integrity, it might mean teaching students to cite AI assistance properly. For policymakers concerned about child safety, as outlined in [16], responsible use requires age verification and content filtering. For democracy advocates, it means ensuring AI doesn't manipulate political discourse. These competing visions of responsibility create a patchwork of rules and expectations that leave both educators and students confused about what constitutes appropriate AI engagement.

[16] Parents & Kids Safe AI Act Amendment 1

Technical Competence vs Critical Understanding

The fault line between technical competence and critical understanding runs through every AI literacy initiative. On one side stand those who emphasize practical skills—prompt engineering, AI tool selection, output verification. [23] documents how institutions rush to make students "AI-ready" for the workforce, focusing on competencies that employers demand. Students learn to craft effective prompts, integrate AI into workflows, and troubleshoot when systems produce unexpected results.

[23] Universities, Employers Increasingly Insist on AI Literacy

This skills-based approach has undeniable appeal. It promises immediate applicability and measurable outcomes. Students who master these technical competencies can point to concrete achievements: faster research, polished writing, automated data analysis. Yet as [21] warns, this emphasis on technical proficiency may come at the cost of deeper cognitive development. When students become dependent on AI for basic tasks, they may lose the ability to think critically about the information these systems produce.

[21] The risks of AI in schools outweigh the benefits, report says

The alternative approach emphasizes critical understanding over technical mastery. Rather than teaching students how to use AI tools effectively, this perspective focuses on understanding AI as a sociotechnical system embedded in relations of power. [12] exemplifies this approach, analyzing how AI amplifies existing patterns of misin-

[12] L'intelligence artificielle : Un nouvel acteur de la désinformation

formation while creating new vectors for deception. Students learn to question not just whether an AI output is accurate, but whose interests it serves and what worldviews it embodies.

The tension between these approaches reflects deeper disagreements about education's purpose. Is the goal to produce workers who can navigate an AI-saturated economy, or citizens who can critically evaluate AI's role in society? [8] suggests these goals need not be mutually exclusive, yet in practice, limited time and resources force educators to choose. The predominance of workforce-preparation narratives in AI literacy discussions reveals which side currently holds sway.

[8] Digital Literacy in the Age of AI: Analysis and Voices from ...

The Missing Democratic Dimension

For all the attention paid to individual AI literacy, remarkably little addresses collective democratic capacity. Current frameworks excel at teaching individuals to protect themselves from AI harms—to spot deepfakes, avoid algorithmic bias, secure personal data. But they largely fail to equip citizens for democratic participation in AI governance. This gap becomes glaring when examining how AI decisions get made in educational institutions.

[24] reveals how AI adoption in schools typically proceeds through administrative fiat rather than democratic deliberation. Administrators select tools, often with minimal input from teachers, students, or parents. The frameworks focus on implementation logistics—data privacy, equity concerns, technical requirements—while sidestepping questions of democratic participation in these consequential decisions.

[24] What's Missing From Your School's AI Adoption Plan? A Roadmap for ...

This democratic deficit extends beyond schools. When cities deploy AI surveillance systems, when courts use algorithmic risk assessment, when social services automate benefit determinations, citizens rarely possess the literacy needed to meaningfully participate in these decisions. They may understand how to use AI tools individually, but lack frameworks for collective evaluation and decision-making. [3] documents how this literacy gap enables AI systems to reshape democratic institutions with minimal public input or oversight.

[3] AI and Democracy: Mapping the Intersections

The consequences ripple outward. Without AI literacy that includes democratic participation, citizens cannot effectively advocate for their interests in AI governance. They cannot evaluate political candidates' AI policies or participate meaningfully in public consultations about algorithmic systems. As [15] notes, successful AI implementation requires trust between institutions and communities—trust that cannot develop when citizens lack the literacy to engage with AI decisions affecting their lives.

[15] Making AI work for schools - Brookings

Whose Literacy Counts: Power and Definition

The question of who defines AI literacy reveals stark power imbalances. Technology companies, eager to shape future consumers and workers, rush to provide their own literacy frameworks. [14] documents how major tech firms offer free AI tools and curricula to cash-strapped schools worldwide. These materials, while often high-quality, embed particular assumptions about AI's inevitability and beneficence.

[14] Los gigantes tecnológicos se apresuran a introducir la IA en las ...

Academic institutions provide alternative definitions, yet these too reflect particular interests. [7] presents sophisticated models linking AI literacy to technology adoption, but these frameworks emerge from business schools focused on producing AI-ready managers rather than critical citizens. The literacy they promote serves institutional needs for compliance and adoption rather than democratic needs for participation and contestation.

[7] Bridging AI literacy and UTAUT constructs: structural equation ... - Nature

Most tellingly, the communities most affected by AI systems rarely participate in defining what literacy means. [22] reveals how women's ethical concerns about AI lead to lower adoption rates, yet these moral considerations rarely appear in mainstream literacy frameworks. Similarly, [1] documents how the Deaf community develops sophisticated AI use practices that differ markedly from hearing-centric assumptions, yet these insights seldom inform general AI literacy curricula.

[22] Une étude révèle que les femmes utilisent moins l'IA générative en raison de préoccupations morales

[1] "We do use it, but not how hearing people think": How the Deaf and Hard ...

The exclusion of marginalized voices from literacy definitions creates self-reinforcing cycles. When frameworks assume technological access and comfort that many lack, they implicitly exclude those already marginalized by digital divides. When assessments privilege technical vocabulary over lived experience with algorithmic systems, they devalue the knowledge of surveilled and algorithmed communities. [2] advocates for more inclusive approaches, yet implementation remains sporadic and under-resourced.

[2] AI and Accessibility in Education - cosn.org

Cross-Domain Connections: Beyond Educational Silos

AI literacy cannot be contained within educational institutions. Its implications ripple across journalism, democracy, law, and social services. Yet most frameworks treat these as separate domains requiring distinct literacies rather than recognizing their fundamental interconnection. This siloing weakens our collective capacity to address AI's society-wide implications.

Consider journalism and information literacy. [20] demonstrates how targeted interventions can help people identify AI-generated im-

[20] Specific media literacy tips improve AI-generated visual misinformation ...

ages. Yet these skills prove insufficient when AI doesn't just create fake images but entire fake news ecosystems, complete with artificial journalists and synthetic sources. [18] reveals how audiences remain unaware of AI's role in content creation, from automated sports reporting to AI-assisted investigative journalism.

[18] Public don't perceive how fast AI is reshaping journalism

The legal domain presents another critical intersection. [13] describes how legal professionals scramble to develop AI literacy while the technology transforms their field. But legal AI literacy cannot exist in isolation from citizen AI literacy—not when algorithmic systems make bail decisions, determine sentences, and allocate legal resources. Citizens need sufficient AI literacy to understand when algorithms affect their legal rights and how to challenge algorithmic decisions in court.

[13] Law librarians are 'at the forefront' of using and educating on ...

These cross-domain connections reveal AI literacy as fundamentally about power and participation across all sectors of society. [17] recognizes this in bringing together journalists and technologists to develop shared frameworks. Yet such collaborations remain rare, with most sectors developing AI literacy in isolation from others.

[17] Poynter and Hacks/Hackers partner to keep fast AI adoption aligned with journalism ethics

Reimagining AI Literacy for Citizen Participation

Moving beyond current limitations requires fundamentally reimagining AI literacy as preparation for democratic citizenship in an algorithmic age. This means shifting from individual competence to collective capacity, from technical skills to critical understanding, from passive consumption to active participation in AI governance.

[19] offers glimpses of this alternative vision, proposing AI literacy as a democratic imperative rather than merely an educational goal. Citizens need not become AI engineers, but they must understand enough to participate meaningfully in decisions about AI deployment in their communities. This participation requires new forms of literacy that current frameworks barely address: the ability to read algorithmic impact assessments, understand AI governance proposals, and collectively evaluate the tradeoffs different AI systems impose.

[19] Rapport - "Littératie en intelligence artificielle (IA)"

[4] documents how some school districts attempt more participatory approaches, involving students, teachers, and community members in AI adoption decisions. These experiments, while limited, suggest possibilities for AI literacy that emphasizes collective deliberation over individual skill acquisition. Students learn not just to use AI tools but to participate in decisions about which tools their schools adopt and how they're implemented.

[4] AI Early Adopter Districts: The Promises and Challenges of Using AI to ...

The path forward requires recognizing AI literacy as fundamentally political, not merely technical. Every definition of literacy embeds assumptions about AI's role in society, about who should make AI decisions, about what constitutes appropriate human-AI interaction. By making these assumptions explicit and opening them to democratic contestation, we can develop AI literacy frameworks that serve democratic rather than merely economic ends. [10] hints at this possibility in its emphasis on responsibility as collectively negotiated rather than technically determined.

[10] FETC 2026: Encouraging Responsible Artificial Intelligence Use in Schools

As AI systems increasingly mediate our social, economic, and political lives, the stakes of AI literacy grow ever higher. The question is not whether people need AI literacy—clearly they do—but what kind of literacy serves democratic participation versus mere adaptation to technological change. Current frameworks, despite their sophisticated models and comprehensive curricula, largely prepare people to live under algorithmic systems rather than to shape them. True AI literacy for citizen participation requires nothing less than reimagining citizens as collective agents in algorithmic governance rather than individual users of AI tools. Until we achieve this transformation, AI literacy will remain a tool for accommodation rather than empowerment, preparing people to navigate an AI-shaped world rather than to shape AI's role in the world.

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