AI Literacy for Citizen Participation

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AI Literacy for Citizen Participation: Mapping the Contested Terrain

Picture a parent discovering their teenager has been confiding intimate secrets to ChatGPT rather than talking to them. A voter encountering deepfaked political content days before an election. A teacher faced with students using AI to complete assignments while administrators demand "AI integration" without clear guidance. These scenarios reveal a fundamental challenge: we're teaching people to use AI tools before we've agreed on what it means to understand them. The scramble to define "AI literacy" has produced a conceptual battlefield where technical skills clash with critical understanding, economic imperatives overshadow democratic needs, and the voices of those most affected remain conspicuously absent.

The urgency is palpable. As [21] notes, AI literacy frameworks are rapidly multiplying across institutions, each proposing different competencies deemed essential for navigating an AI-infused world. Yet this proliferation masks deeper tensions about purpose, power, and participation that shape who gets to define literacy and for what ends. The question isn't simply what people need to know about AI, but rather what kind of knowing serves democratic participation versus economic productivity, individual empowerment versus institutional control.

[21] Understanding AI Literacy | Teaching Commons

The Babel of AI Literacies

The attempt to define AI literacy reveals competing visions of what citizens need in an algorithmic society. [5] presents a tripartite model focused on understanding AI concepts, evaluating AI applications, and using AI tools effectively. This technical-functional approach dominates educational frameworks, emphasizing skills acquisition and practical competence. Yet even within this seemingly straightforward definition lie contested assumptions about the nature of understanding itself.

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

The UNESCO guide [9] expands the terrain considerably, embed-

[9] Guía para el uso de IA generativa en educación e investigación

ding AI literacy within broader concerns of equity, inclusion, and ethical development. Here, literacy becomes not merely about individual capabilities but about collective capacities for co-design and critical engagement. The guide's emphasis on participatory approaches suggests that understanding AI requires more than technical knowledge—it demands awareness of power relations and social impacts.

This conceptual expansion continues in [19], which explicitly frames AI literacy as a question of democratic participation and social inclusion. The report argues that current definitions privilege technical mastery while neglecting the critical capacities citizens need to question, contest, and reshape AI systems. This tension between instrumental and critical approaches represents more than academic debate—it shapes what gets taught, who teaches it, and whose interests are served.

[19] PDF RAPPORT OCTOBRE 2025 Déployer une littératie en IA pour une

The fragmentation becomes even more apparent when examining regional variations. [17] presents a comprehensive French national framework that emphasizes regulatory compliance and institutional governance, while [6] proposes an "intelligence-based" framework for primary education that integrates technical, ethical, and social dimensions. These aren't merely translation differences—they reflect distinct cultural assumptions about the relationship between citizens, technology, and the state.

[17] PDF L'Ia En Éducation

[6] Alfabetización en Inteligencia Artificial (IA) - Español

The Skills-Understanding Divide

The most persistent fault line in AI literacy debates runs between those who emphasize practical skills and those who champion critical understanding. [20] exemplifies the skills-first approach, arguing that prompt engineering should join the canon of essential competencies alongside critical thinking and digital literacy. The appeal is obvious: concrete, teachable skills that promise immediate applicability in educational and workplace contexts.

[20] Prompt engineering as a new 21st century skill

Yet this focus on instrumental competence obscures deeper questions. As [10] demonstrates through controlled experiments, AI tool usage can simultaneously boost productivity while inhibiting learning. Students using AI assistance completed tasks faster but showed reduced understanding of underlying concepts—a finding that challenges the assumption that tool proficiency equals literacy. The research reveals a fundamental tension: the very efficiency that makes AI tools attractive may undermine the deeper understanding necessary for critical engagement.

[10] How AI assistance impacts the formation of coding skills

This paradox extends beyond coding to broader educational con-

texts. [3] documents how students increasingly use AI as a shortcut rather than a learning aid, raising questions about what "literacy" means when the technology itself can substitute for understanding. The article's surveys reveal a troubling pattern: students report using AI to complete assignments while acknowledging they learn less in the process. This suggests that teaching AI skills without cultivating critical understanding may produce a peculiar form of functional illiteracy—users who can operate tools they don't comprehend.

[3] AI is changing how students learn — or avoid learning

The critical understanding camp offers a compelling alternative. [4] proposes a framework that distinguishes between functional literacy (using tools), critical literacy (understanding implications), and what they term "indirectly beneficial" literacy—awareness of AI's presence even when not directly using it. This multidimensional approach recognizes that citizens encounter AI not just as users but as subjects of algorithmic decision-making, requiring different forms of understanding for different contexts.

[4] AI Literacy in K-12 and Higher Education in the Wake of Generative AI ...

Democratic Deficits in the Literacy Landscape

Current AI literacy frameworks consistently underemphasize the capacities citizens need for democratic participation. [11] provides sobering evidence of this gap, documenting how AI systems shape political discourse, electoral processes, and civic engagement in ways that most literacy frameworks ignore. The study reveals that while citizens increasingly encounter AI-mediated political content, few possess the critical tools to recognize or resist algorithmic influence on democratic processes.

[11] Democracy Works: How AI is changing democracy

The security and surveillance dimensions of AI present particularly acute challenges for democratic participation. [7] documents the proliferation of AI surveillance in educational settings, technologies that students must navigate daily yet rarely appear in literacy curricula. The absence is telling: frameworks focus on how to use AI while ignoring how AI uses us, particularly in spaces meant to foster democratic citizenship.

[7] Drones, surveillance IA, écoutes jusque dans les toilettes... Aux Etats-Unis, les lycées se placent sous haute surveillance grâce à l'IA

The misinformation crisis further exposes literacy gaps. [1] demonstrates that targeted education can improve citizens' ability to identify manipulated content, yet such interventions remain marginal to mainstream AI literacy efforts. The study's use of "inoculation theory"—exposing people to weakened forms of misinformation to build resistance—suggests that democratic AI literacy requires active practice in criticism and skepticism, not just technical knowledge.

[1] 'Inoculation' helps people spot political deepfakes, study finds

[2] offers a rare counter-example, demonstrating how participatory

[2] A vision for responsible AI integration in citizen science

approaches can cultivate democratic AI literacy. The framework emphasizes co-design, community ownership, and distributed expertise—principles largely absent from institutional AI literacy programs. This participatory model suggests that democratic AI literacy isn't something delivered to citizens but developed with and by them.

The Politics of Definition

Who gets to define AI literacy matters as much as the definition itself. [15] reveals how institutional voices dominate the conversation, with administrators, policymakers, and technology vendors setting agendas that prioritize workforce preparation and risk management over democratic empowerment. The report's extensive stakeholder consultations included educators and administrators but notably underrepresented students and community members—those most affected by AI implementation.

[15] PDF Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning

This pattern repeats across contexts. [22] explicitly targets administrators and decision-makers, framing AI literacy as something to be managed rather than democratically negotiated. While the roadmap addresses equity concerns, it does so from an institutional perspective that positions communities as recipients rather than co-creators of AI literacy.

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

The absence of marginalized voices is particularly glaring. [14] documents how AI tools can either enhance or hinder accessibility, yet disability communities rarely participate in defining what AI literacy means for them. The report notes that while AI promises personalized learning for students with disabilities, the literacy frameworks guiding implementation often reflect ableist assumptions about "normal" interaction with technology.

[14] PDF AI and Accessibility in Education - cosn.org

Youth perspectives face similar marginalization despite young people's central role in AI adoption. [13] provides crucial data on youth AI usage patterns, revealing that one in three young people regularly engage with generative AI, often in ways that surprise adult observers. Yet [23] shows how adult anxieties about youth AI use shape literacy discussions more than young people's actual experiences and needs.

[13] New Aura and UNC-Chapel Hill Study Finds One in Three...

[23] Your teen turned to AI instead of you. What experts say parents can do

Beyond Individual Competence

The individualistic focus of most AI literacy frameworks misses crucial collective dimensions. [12] argues that rapid AI advancement makes individual knowledge obsolete within months, requiring continuous collective learning processes rather than one-time literacy acquisition.

[12] La durée de validité d'un savoir se compte parfois en mois : comment l'IA bouleverse les diplômes

This temporal dimension—the speed of change—demands frameworks that emphasize learning how to learn collectively rather than mastering fixed competencies.

Community-based approaches offer promising alternatives. [8] documents Latin American initiatives where communities develop AI literacy through collective action on social justice issues. These projects demonstrate that meaningful AI literacy emerges not from individual skill acquisition but from communal practice addressing shared concerns. The initiatives' emphasis on territory, gender, and decolonial perspectives suggests that democratic AI literacy must be grounded in specific contexts and struggles.

[8] Experiencias comunitarias de Inteligencia Artificial como herramienta...

The workplace provides another arena where collective capacities matter. [11] reveals how AI implementation affects entire work communities, requiring collective negotiation of new practices rather than individual adaptation. Workers must develop shared understandings of how AI changes their roles, relationships, and rights—a process poorly served by individualistic literacy frameworks.

[11] Impact de l'IA sur le temps de travail : gains de productivité ou surcharge ?

Educational institutions slowly recognize these collective dimensions. [16] proposes "collaborative AI literacy" as a distinct competency, acknowledging that understanding AI increasingly requires group sense-making and collective action. Yet even progressive frameworks struggle to operationalize collective approaches within individualistic educational systems.

[16] PDF Empowering Learners for the Age of AI

Toward Democratic AI Literacy

The evidence reveals a profound mismatch between dominant AI literacy frameworks and the capacities citizens need for democratic participation. Current approaches privilege individual technical skills over collective critical capacities, institutional perspectives over community voices, and economic productivity over democratic agency. This isn't simply an oversight—it reflects deeper assumptions about the purpose of literacy in algorithmic societies.

[18] offers a provocative reframing, arguing that AI literacy must address not just technical systems but the new forms of relationships and attachments they create. This relational approach recognizes that citizens don't simply use AI—they live with, through, and sometimes against it. Democratic literacy requires understanding these entanglements and developing capacities to reshape them.

[18] PDF Pour une éducation à la pluralité des altérités et des attachements...

The path forward demands fundamental shifts in how we conceptualize and cultivate AI literacy. Rather than delivering pre-packaged competencies, we need participatory processes where affected commu-

nities define what understanding means for them. Instead of individual skill acquisition, we must foster collective capacities for critique and transformation. Beyond using AI tools, citizens need abilities to question AI logics and imagine alternatives.

The stakes couldn't be higher. As AI systems increasingly mediate democratic processes—from information access to political participation—the kind of literacy we cultivate shapes the kind of democracy we can sustain. The current trajectory, dominated by institutional agendas and instrumental approaches, risks producing citizens fluent in AI operation but mute in AI governance. True democratic AI literacy would empower people not just to navigate algorithmic systems but to interrogate and reconstruct them in service of collective flourishing.

The conceptual muddle around AI literacy isn't merely academic confusion—it's a political struggle over who shapes our algorithmic future. Until we resolve it in favor of genuine democratic participation, we risk creating a peculiar form of mass literacy: millions who can prompt an AI but can't question its presence, who can use its outputs but can't challenge its power. The task ahead isn't just teaching people about AI but empowering them to imagine and build alternatives to the AI world being built around them.

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