AI Literacy for Citizen Participation

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In the rush to prepare citizens for an AI-saturated future, we've created a curious paradox: the more we try to define AI literacy, the less literate we seem to become. Across educational institutions, policy forums, and public discourse, "AI literacy" has become a catch-all term that simultaneously means everything and nothing. From technical competencies to ethical frameworks, from digital safety to democratic participation, the concept stretches to accommodate wildly different agendas. Yet as [7] demonstrates, this conceptual confusion isn't merely academic—it shapes how millions of students, workers, and citizens understand their relationship to increasingly powerful automated systems.

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

The stakes of this definitional struggle extend far beyond classroom walls. When 68% of young people already use AI for health information and 85% of students adopt generative AI tools, as documented in [22], the question of what constitutes AI literacy becomes urgent. Are we teaching people to be savvy users, critical thinkers, or merely compliant subjects of algorithmic systems? The answer depends entirely on whose definition wins.

[22] Intelligence artificielle : comment protéger la jeunesse ...

This essay maps the contested terrain of AI literacy, examining how competing frameworks shape not just what we teach but what kind of citizens we're creating. Through analysis of educational initiatives, policy documents, and emerging practices, I trace the tensions between protective approaches that shield users from harm and participatory models that equip them for democratic engagement. The evidence reveals a troubling pattern: in our eagerness to manage AI's risks, we may be foreclosing its democratic possibilities.

The Battle Over Definitions

The struggle to define AI literacy resembles nothing so much as the parable of blind men describing an elephant—each expert grasps a different part and declares it the whole. Computer scientists emphasize technical understanding, ethicists focus on moral reasoning, educators stress pedagogical applications, and policymakers fixate on risk mitigation. The result is a conceptual battlefield where fundamentally different visions compete for dominance.

Consider the stark differences between major frameworks. [37] proposes four distinct dimensions: functional (using AI tools effectively), ethical (understanding moral implications), rhetorical (recognizing AI's persuasive capacities), and pedagogical (integrating AI into teaching). Meanwhile, [10] offers the 3C-3H+DS framework specifically for young learners, emphasizing curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, human-centeredness, hope, and humor alongside data science concepts. These aren't merely different emphases—they represent fundamentally different visions of what citizens need to know.

[37] Understanding AI Literacy | Teaching Commons

[10] Building early AI literacy: developing a pedagogical ...

The definitional confusion intensifies when examining international variations. [18] presents yet another comprehensive framework with learner personas, competences, and scenarios, while [28] from UNESCO emphasizes human rights and equity considerations. Each framework claims comprehensiveness, yet none fully captures the complexity of preparing citizens for AI-mediated life.

[18] PDF Empowering Learners for the Age of AI

[28] Orientations pour l'intelligence artificielle générative dans l'éducation et la recherche

This definitional chaos isn't merely academic. As [24] reveals through its narrative review, the lack of consensus creates practical problems: curricula vary wildly, assessment remains inconsistent, and students receive contradictory messages about AI's nature and significance. Teachers trained under one framework find themselves ill-equipped for contexts emphasizing different dimensions.

[24] Landscape of AI literacy in education: approaches, impacts, and ...

The corporate sector adds another layer of complexity. [8] frames literacy primarily through workforce readiness, emphasizing technical skills and productivity gains. This instrumental approach, focused on making workers "AI-ready," contrasts sharply with critical frameworks that question AI's societal impacts. When IBM's SkillsBuild platform teaches AI literacy, it's teaching something fundamentally different from what critical media educators envision.

[8] Alfabetización en IA: cerrar la brecha de habilidades en ... - IBM

The Protectionist Paradigm

Perhaps no trend better illustrates our conceptual confusion than the overwhelming emphasis on protection over empowerment. Across frameworks, initiatives, and policies, AI literacy increasingly means learning to defend against AI's harms rather than harnessing its possibilities. This protectionist turn, while understandable given real risks, fundamentally limits how we imagine citizen engagement with AI systems.

The child protection discourse exemplifies this tendency. [29] articulates ten requirements for governments and businesses, focusing heavily on preventing harm, ensuring safety, and maintaining oversight. Similarly, campaigns against "AI slop" on YouTube, as detailed

[29] PDF 3.0 | DECEMBER 2025 Guidance on AI and Children - UNICEF

in [1], frame AI-generated content as an existential threat to child development. While these concerns are legitimate, they shape a discourse where AI literacy means primarily learning what to avoid.

[1] "AI slop" : ces contenus générés par IA qui envahissent YouTube Kids et inquiètent les experts

This protectionist framework extends beyond children. [3] documents how older adults face targeted AI-enabled fraud, while [35] reveals the precarious position of workers scrambling to avoid obsolescence. In each case, AI literacy becomes defensive—learning to recognize scams, detect deepfakes, or maintain employability against AI competition.

[3] Vulnerability Target Warning: AI Scams Exploiting Elderly Surge - AI ...

[35] There's a lot of desperation': skilled older workers turn to AI training to stay afloat

The emphasis on protection shapes pedagogical approaches in troubling ways. [20] shows how educational frameworks increasingly focus on misinformation detection and verification skills. While important, this defensive posture positions learners as potential victims rather than empowered actors. Students learn to spot AI-generated essays but not to collaborate creatively with AI tools; they master detection techniques but not co-creation strategies.

[20] GenAI and misinformation in education: a systematic scoping ...

Even accessibility initiatives, ostensibly empowering, often embed protectionist assumptions. [2] presents AI as solving accessibility challenges, yet the framework assumes users need protection from AI's complexity through simplified interfaces and guided interactions. The line between accessibility and paternalism blurs when systems decide what users can handle.

[2] AccessiLearnAI: An Accessibility-First, AI-Powered E-Learning ... - MDPI

Policy documents crystallize these protectionist impulses. [15] recommends extensive regulatory oversight focused on preventing bias, surveillance, and discriminatory outcomes. While these goals are laudable, the framework offers little vision for how citizens might actively shape AI development or deployment. Protection dominates participation.

[15] Department of Education - Center for American Progress

The Skills-Critical Divide

A fundamental tension runs through AI literacy frameworks: should we teach people how to use AI tools effectively, or how to critique their societal impacts? This isn't merely a pedagogical debate—it reflects deeper disagreements about citizenship in an algorithmic age. The divide between skills-based and critical approaches reveals conflicting visions of human agency.

Skills-based frameworks dominate institutional initiatives. [4] describes teaching faculty to integrate AI tools into coursework, emphasizing practical applications over critical analysis. The institute's integration scale measures success by tool adoption rates rather than

[4] Advancing AI Literacy: A Faculty Course Refresh Institute at Indiana ...

critical engagement depth. Similarly, [13] celebrates widespread AI adoption across California State University without interrogating what students actually understand about these systems' operations or implications.

[13] CSU Shares AI Learnings in Systemwide Survey

This instrumental approach extends into K-12 education. [27] encourages teachers to use AI for lesson planning and assessment, framing literacy as tool proficiency. The framework assumes that using AI well equals understanding AI well—a questionable proposition when black-box systems hide their operations from users.

[27] Nouveau cadre de compétences numériques : encourager les enseignants à utiliser l'IA dans leur enseignement

Critical frameworks offer a sharp contrast. [14] positions AI literacy as fundamentally epistemological, requiring citizens to grapple with how AI undermines traditional notions of truth and evidence. This approach demands not just technical knowledge but philosophical sophistication—understanding how AI reshapes the very foundations of knowledge. [38] provides empirical evidence that technical knowledge alone doesn't lead to constructive engagement, challenging the assumptions underlying skills-based approaches.

[14] Deepfakes and the crisis of knowing - UNESCO

[38] When knowing knowledge and adults more means doing less: Algorithmic ...

Some frameworks attempt synthesis, with mixed results. [31] combines technical implementation details with privacy rights discourse, trying to bridge practical and critical concerns. Yet even here, the technical specifications dominate, with critical perspectives relegated to introductory context. The skills imperative overwhelms critical reflection.

[31] PDF Building Privacy and Preserving AI Models for Secure Student Data ...

The divide manifests starkly in assessment approaches. Skills-based frameworks measure success through usage metrics and task completion, while critical frameworks emphasize analytical depth and systemic thinking. [36] reveals how these different assessment paradigms produce incompatible results—students can score high on skills tests while lacking critical understanding, or vice versa.

[36] Towards an AI-Literate Future: A Systematic Literature ... - Springer

Whose Voices Are Missing?

Perhaps the most telling aspect of AI literacy frameworks is not what they include but what they omit. Across dozens of frameworks, certain voices remain conspicuously absent, their perspectives marginalized or ignored entirely. This systematic exclusion shapes AI literacy in ways that reinforce existing power structures rather than challenging them.

Students themselves rarely appear as knowledge creators in AI literacy discourse. [17] exemplifies this pattern, discussing young people's AI interactions without including their perspectives. Adults debate what children need to know, but children's own experiences navigating

[17] Digital safety for children - "Better design instead of blanket ..."

AI systems remain unexamined. When [11] discusses preparing young people for an AI-saturated future, it does so without incorporating youth voices about their current AI experiences.

[11] Building Human Resilience for the Age of AI

The Global South perspective remains largely absent from mainstream frameworks. [IA, illectronisme, smartphones : le vrai niveau numérique des Français]() focuses exclusively on French digital divides, while similar patterns appear across European and North American frameworks. When [23] addresses African AI needs, it highlights how different contexts demand different literacy approaches—yet these insights rarely inform global frameworks.

[23] Intelligence artificielle en Afrique : le moment des plateformes utiles

Labor voices, particularly from workers being displaced or deskilled by AI, appear only as problems to be solved rather than perspectives to be heard. [3] documents AI's workforce impacts without incorporating worker perspectives on what literacy might mean from their position. The frameworks assume workers need reskilling but don't ask what workers themselves identify as necessary knowledge.

[3] Adoption inégale, cadre flou, compétences attendues : l'impact de l'IA dans le commerce et le marketing

Gender perspectives remain underdeveloped despite gendered patterns in AI harm. When frameworks address AI-generated harassment or deepfakes targeting women and girls, they do so through a protectionist lens rather than incorporating feminist analyses of technology and power. The absence is particularly glaring given evidence of gendered AI impacts in education and employment.

Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems find no place in AI literacy frameworks, despite offering potentially transformative perspectives on human-machine relations. The frameworks assume Western conceptual categories—individual users, rational actors, market relationships—without acknowledging alternative ways of understanding intelligence, agency, or community.

[32] and similar policy documents demonstrate how official frameworks institutionalize these exclusions. Created through expert committees and stakeholder consultations that systematically exclude marginalized voices, they present AI literacy as politically neutral technical knowledge rather than contested terrain. The frameworks shape not just what counts as literacy but who counts as literate.

[32] PDF L'IA en éducation - cadre d'usage - Education.gouv.fr

Beyond Protection: Toward Democratic Participation

What would AI literacy look like if oriented toward democratic participation rather than risk mitigation? Scattered throughout the frameworks are hints of more empowering approaches, though they remain underdeveloped compared to protectionist elements. These glimpses

suggest possibilities for reimagining AI literacy as a tool for collective action rather than individual defense.

[26] offers one model, teaching stakeholders to demand accountability from AI systems rather than simply adapting to them. The workshop approach transforms participants from passive users to active advocates, capable of articulating demands for interpretable and auditable systems. This shifts the literacy focus from individual competence to collective capacity for system change.

[26] Making Transparency Advocates: An Educational Approach Towards Better ...

Some frameworks emphasize co-creation over consumption. [10] includes "creativity" as a core component, encouraging young learners to see themselves as potential AI creators rather than merely users. While limited by its focus on individual creativity rather than collective creation, it suggests directions for more participatory approaches.

[10] Building early AI literacy: developing a pedagogical ... - Springer

Critical data literacy offers another pathway. [34] moves beyond detection skills to examine the political economy of misinformation, asking who benefits from AI-amplified falsehoods and how citizens might collectively resist. This systemic approach positions literacy as understanding power relations rather than mastering technical skills.

[34] PDF Éduquer contre la désinformation amplifiée par l'IA et l'hypertrucage ...

Community-based frameworks provide additional models. [18] includes community-level competencies alongside individual ones, recognizing that AI literacy might be collectively held rather than individually possessed. Communities might develop shared practices for evaluating AI systems, negotiating with AI developers, or creating alternatives to commercial AI.

[18] Empowering Learners for the Age of AI

The labor movement offers largely untapped resources for participatory AI literacy. Workers using AI systems daily develop practical knowledge about their operations, limitations, and impacts—knowledge that rarely appears in formal frameworks. [35] hints at this expertise while focusing on individual adaptation rather than collective response.

[35] There's a lot of desperation': skilled older workers turn to AI training to stay afloat

Participatory design methodologies suggest ways to restructure AI literacy education itself. Rather than experts defining what citizens need to know, communities could identify their own AI-related challenges and develop contextually appropriate responses. This would produce multiple, locally relevant literacies rather than universal frameworks.

The Hidden Curriculum of AI Literacy

Beneath the explicit content of AI literacy frameworks lies a hidden curriculum—unstated lessons about power, agency, and the future.

These implicit messages may shape citizens' relationships with AI more profoundly than any explicit instruction. Examining what frameworks take for granted reveals troubling assumptions about democracy in an algorithmic age.

Most frameworks assume AI's inevitability and ubiquity. [19] analyzes how institutions manage AI integration without questioning whether such integration serves educational goals. The hidden lesson: resistance is futile, adaptation mandatory. Citizens learn to accommodate AI rather than shape its development or deployment.

[19] Frontiers | AI at the knowledge gates: institutional policies and ...

The frameworks embed particular notions of individual agency—typically framed as consumer choice rather than collective action. [5] documents state responses that emphasize individual teacher and student choices about AI use while ignoring collective governance questions. Citizens become consumers selecting among AI options rather than participants shaping AI futures.

[5] AI Is Already Disrupting Education, but Only 13 States Are Offering ...

Technical complexity serves as a barrier to democratic participation. When [9] explains hallucinations through technical details about transformer architectures and sampling methods, it implicitly suggests that meaningful AI literacy requires extensive technical knowledge. This technocratic framing excludes most citizens from substantive engagement with AI governance.

[9] An Update on AI Hallucinations: Not as Bad as You Remember or as You've ...

The emphasis on individual skills reinforces neoliberal notions of personal responsibility for structural problems. [12] discusses how African students navigate AI challenges through individual adaptation rather than collective organization. The hidden curriculum teaches that AI's negative impacts result from insufficient individual preparation rather than systemic issues requiring collective response.

[12] ChatGPT's benefits, acceptance, and ethical challenges for ... - Springer

Even critical frameworks often reproduce problematic assumptions. [16] introduces sophisticated concepts like "affective disinformation" and "broken presence," but the complexity of the theoretical framework may exclude the very communities most affected by AI harms. Critical literacy becomes another form of elite knowledge.

[16] Desinformación afectiva y presencia rota: pedagogía crítica ante la ...

The hidden curriculum extends to assessment and credentialing. Who decides what counts as AI literacy? Who certifies literate citizens? [30] proposes federal involvement in AI education without addressing how standardized approaches might reproduce existing educational inequalities. The power to define and assess literacy becomes another mechanism of social sorting.

[30] PDF Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Teaching and Learning (PDF)

The current landscape of AI literacy frameworks reveals a profound mismatch between stated goals and actual practices. While rhetorically committed to empowering citizens, most frameworks emphasize individual adaptation to AI systems rather than collective capacity to shape them. This conservative orientation limits democratic possibilities at precisely the moment when imaginative alternatives are most needed.

A genuinely democratic AI literacy would start from different premises. Rather than asking "What do individuals need to know about AI?" it would ask "What collective capacities do communities need to govern AI?" This shift from individual to collective, from adaptation to governance, opens new possibilities for AI literacy education.

Community-based AI auditing offers one model. Groups could learn to collectively evaluate AI systems affecting their communities—hiring algorithms, predictive policing systems, educational technologies. [25] hints at this possibility when discussing community involvement in school AI decisions, though it stops short of proposing genuine community governance. The skills needed for collective auditing differ markedly from those emphasized in current frameworks: organizing, deliberation, power analysis, strategic communication.

[25] Making AI work for schools - Brookings

AI literacy could emphasize creating alternatives rather than merely critiquing existing systems. Communities might learn to develop their own AI applications addressing local needs, as suggested by [23]. This requires not just technical skills but organizational capacities, resource mobilization, and community engagement—literacies largely absent from current frameworks.

[23] Intelligence artificielle en Afrique : le moment des plateformes utiles

The role of educators would shift from information transmitters to capacity builders. Rather than teaching predetermined content about AI, educators would facilitate community investigations of AI impacts and possibilities. [21] gestures toward this when discussing moving from familiarity to appropriation, though it remains focused on individual rather than collective appropriation.

[21] IA à l'école : la transformation de la familiarité en appropriation

Assessment would focus on collective capacities rather than individual competencies. Can a community effectively evaluate an AI system affecting it? Can it articulate demands to developers or regulators? Can it organize resistance to harmful implementations or support for beneficial ones? These questions require new assessment methodologies emphasizing collective action rather than individual knowledge.

International solidarity becomes crucial for democratic AI governance. Communities facing similar AI challenges—whether algorithmic bias in hiring, automated decision-making in public services, or surveillance in schools—could share strategies and build collective power. Current frameworks' national boundaries limit such solidarity, treating AI literacy as a competitive advantage rather than a collective resource.

This reimagining requires confronting uncomfortable questions about power and privilege in AI development. Who benefits from current AI systems? Who bears the costs? How might different literacy frameworks either reinforce or challenge these distributions? [33] begins addressing these questions through its ethical framework, though it remains institutionally bounded rather than community-driven.

[33] PDF Política de uso responsable, transparente y ético de la Inteligencia ...

Conclusion: The Politics of AI Literacy

The struggle over AI literacy is fundamentally a struggle over the future of democratic participation in an algorithmic society. Current frameworks, despite their diversity, share troubling commonalities: they emphasize individual over collective responses, adaptation over transformation, and protection over participation. These choices aren't neutral—they shape what kinds of citizens we're creating and what kinds of futures we're enabling.

The evidence reveals a stark gap between AI's rapid deployment across social institutions and citizens' capacity to meaningfully shape that deployment. [6] surveys the landscape of initiatives but doesn't address this fundamental power imbalance. Teaching people to use AI tools or spot AI harms, while necessary, is insufficient for democratic governance of AI systems.

[6] AI Literacy Review - April 7, 2026 - AI Literacy Institute

We need AI literacy frameworks that take democracy seriously—that prepare citizens not just to navigate AI-shaped worlds but to actively construct them. This requires moving beyond protective approaches that position citizens as potential victims and skills-based frameworks that reduce them to users. It demands recognizing AI literacy as irreducibly political, contested, and collective.

The path forward isn't through better individual training but through building collective capacities for AI governance. Communities need to develop their own context-specific literacies, create alternative AI systems serving collective needs, and build power to demand accountability from AI developers and deployers. Educators, policymakers, and technologists can support these efforts, but communities themselves must drive the process.

As AI systems increasingly mediate social life—from education to employment, from healthcare to criminal justice—the stakes of AI literacy grow ever higher. The question isn't whether citizens will live with AI but whether they'll have any meaningful say in how AI shapes their lives. Current literacy frameworks, focused on individual adaptation rather than collective action, prepare citizens for subjecthood rather than citizenship in an algorithmic age. We can and must do better.

The contested terrain of AI literacy reflects deeper struggles over democracy, technology, and power. By mapping this terrain, we see not inevitable futures but political choices. The frameworks we choose, the voices we include, and the capacities we develop will shape whether AI enhances or erodes democratic possibility. In this light, AI literacy isn't just another educational initiative—it's a crucial battleground for the future of democracy itself.

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