DIGI-Story
Digital Storytellers: Empowering Youth Through Media Literacy and Transmedia

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From consumers to prosumers: Rethinking young people's role in digital media

Developed by: Neotalentway

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Abstract

Young people occupy an increasingly complex position within contemporary digital media ecosystems. They are intensive consumers of social media but also potential producers, distributors and interpreters of digital content. This dual role is commonly associated with the concept of the prosumer. However, frequent social media use does not necessarily translate into active or critically informed content creation. This article examines the transition from consumer to prosumer through a review of research on participatory culture and transmedia literacy, complemented by empirical findings from DIGI-Story – Digital Storytellers: Empowering Youth Through Media Literacy and Transmedia. Data collected from 165 young people in the Czech Republic, Spain and Portugal reveal intensive social media use but a comparatively weak identification with the role of content creator. The findings suggest that media literacy education should move beyond technical familiarity and support young people in becoming critical, ethical and creative participants in digital culture.

Keywords: prosumers, youth, social media, transmedia literacy, participatory culture, digital content creation, media literacy.

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1. Introduction

Social media have transformed the distinction between producing and consuming media. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and YouTube allow users to move continuously between watching, commenting, sharing, remixing and creating content. The traditional division between a relatively small group of media producers and a much larger audience has consequently become increasingly difficult to maintain.

The idea of the prosumer, originally associated with the convergence of production and consumption, has acquired renewed relevance within this digital environment. Social media users can consume a video, redistribute it, comment on it and subsequently create their own response, adaptation or alternative narrative. Production and consumption increasingly coexist within the same media practices.

This transformation is closely related to Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture, in which audiences should not simply be understood as passive recipients of professionally produced media. Networked technologies have created new opportunities for people to participate in the production, circulation and interpretation of media. Subsequent work by Jenkins, Ito and boyd (2016) stresses, however, that participation must be understood within its social and cultural contexts rather than simply as an individual capacity enabled by technology.

For young people, these developments are particularly relevant. Social networks constitute everyday environments for communication, entertainment, information and self-expression. Yet an important question remains: does intensive participation in social media actually turn young people into active digital producers?

Research conducted within DIGI-Story suggests that the answer is more complex than might initially be assumed.

2. Consumers, Prosumers and Participation

Contemporary digital environments offer significantly greater opportunities for users to produce and distribute content than traditional mass-media systems. A smartphone can provide access to recording, editing, publishing and distribution tools that previously required specialised equipment and professional knowledge.

However, access to these possibilities does not automatically result in active production.

This distinction is important when discussing young people as digital natives. Familiarity with platforms and devices may create an impression of advanced digital competence, but frequent use does not necessarily imply an understanding of how digital information is produced, selected, verified or circulated.

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The concept of participatory culture offers a more nuanced approach. Participation includes not only creating original media products but also sharing information, interacting with communities, remixing existing material, collaborating and contributing to the circulation of content (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2016).

The concept of the prosumer therefore becomes particularly useful. Rather than dividing individuals into two mutually exclusive categories — producer or consumer — it encourages us to examine the different degrees to which people participate in digital production.

Research on teenagers supports precisely this more differentiated interpretation. Guerrero-Pico, Masanet and Scolari (2019), for example, identified casual, aspirational and expert produsers, demonstrating substantial differences in young people's production practices, motivations, planning and narrative and aesthetic knowledge.

Consequently, not every social media user is a prosumer to the same degree.

3. Transmedia literacy and youth

This distinction has important implications for media education.

Traditional media literacy has frequently focused on providing learners with the critical skills necessary to interpret media messages. The contemporary digital ecosystem requires this critical dimension to be complemented by an understanding of how people create, manipulate, circulate and transform media.

The concept of transmedia literacy addresses this changing environment.

Scolari, Masanet, Guerrero-Pico and Establés (2018) describe transmedia literacy as an approach that shifts attention towards what young people are already doing with media and how they learn these practices within informal environments and participatory cultures. Their research identified a broad range of transmedia skills rather than a single uniform form of digital competence.

This is an important distinction. A young person may, for example, be highly skilled at producing short-form video but have limited knowledge of copyright. Another may navigate multiple social networks effectively while having difficulty recognising misinformation. Others may understand the mechanics of publishing content without considering privacy, digital footprints or the ethical implications of sharing images involving other people.

Media competence should therefore be understood as multidimensional.

This perspective also challenges educational approaches based exclusively on correcting young people's supposed digital deficiencies. Young people already acquire numerous

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media competences informally through experimentation, imitation, tutorials, peer interaction and online communities. The educational challenge is to recognise these existing competences while developing those that remain weak or unevenly distributed.

4. Evidence from DIGI-Story

The research conducted as part of DIGI-Story provides an opportunity to examine these questions within three European contexts.

The project's cross-national study combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Online questionnaires were conducted in the Czech Republic, Spain and Portugal, complemented by focus groups with experts in media literacy, education and youth work. The final comparative sample comprised 165 respondents, predominantly students and young people under 25.

The study examined young people's online behaviour and their position as both consumers and creators of digital content. Its purpose was not only to identify national differences but also to detect common gaps and establish priorities for subsequent DIGI-Story educational resources.

One of the clearest findings concerns the intensity of digital participation. Social media use is substantial across the three participating countries, with Instagram and YouTube emerging as common reference platforms. The report describes the resulting environment as highly visual, fast-paced and algorithm-driven.

However, high levels of exposure and participation do not necessarily translate into active content creation.

5. The prosumer paradox

Perhaps the most significant DIGI-Story finding for understanding prosumer culture is the apparent contradiction between what young people do online and how they perceive their own role.

Many respondents reported having created or shared digital content at some point. Nevertheless, the majority continued to identify primarily as members of the audience rather than as active creators.

Only 6% of Portuguese respondents, approximately 8% of Spanish respondents and 12.3% of Czech respondents identified as active content creators. The report therefore concludes that the prosumer role remains underdeveloped among the participants.

These findings resonate with Guerrero-Pico et al. (2019), whose research warns against treating young media producers as a homogeneous category. Their study of teenagers

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across eight countries identified significant variations in production knowledge and distinguished between casual, aspirational and expert produsers.

The DIGI-Story results similarly suggest that occasional production should not automatically be equated with a consolidated identity as a digital creator.

This distinction matters educationally. Young people may already possess an important starting point for participation without necessarily perceiving themselves as capable of producing meaningful digital narratives.

6. Creation requires more than access

The DIGI-Story results also challenge the assumption that frequent social media users necessarily possess advanced digital production skills.

The Common Report identifies important gaps in familiarity with basic production tools. In particular, 20% of Czech and 28% of Spanish respondents reported having no knowledge of basic digital production tools. The report additionally observes that even among participants who create content, production tends to be infrequent and based on relatively basic skills.

This finding reinforces the importance of distinguishing between platform use and creative competence.

Being able to navigate TikTok, Instagram or YouTube does not necessarily mean knowing how to plan a narrative, combine media formats, edit audiovisual material, evaluate sources or adapt a message for a specific audience.

Nor does technical competence alone constitute comprehensive media literacy.

Scolari et al. (2018) demonstrate that young people's transmedia competences encompass numerous dimensions and emerge through diverse informal learning strategies. Their research therefore argues for a broader understanding of what young people know how to do with media and how those competences are acquired.

The educational objective should consequently not be simply to teach young people how to operate digital tools. It should enable them to use those tools purposefully, creatively and critically.

7. Critical prosumption

Content creation also involves responsibility.

Producing and circulating information means making decisions about sources, accuracy, privacy, copyright, representation and potential effects on other users. Becoming a

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prosumer therefore requires more than learning how to make an attractive video or social media post.

The DIGI-Story findings make this particularly visible.

Approximately 94% of participants across the three countries had encountered misinformation, demonstrating the extent to which misleading information forms part of young people's everyday digital environment. Yet ignoring misinformation was the dominant reaction, while verification behaviour remained comparatively limited.

The country-level findings make the gap even clearer. The report indicates that ignoring misinformation was the dominant response in all three countries: approximately 62% in the Czech Republic, 52% in Spain and 64% in Portugal. By contrast, only 13%, 26% and 16%, respectively, reported actively verifying information before reacting.

Problems also emerge around copyright awareness, privacy and ethical content sharing. In Spain, for example, 44% reported always considering ethical aspects when creating or sharing content, while 42% did so only sometimes. In the Czech sample, 30.8% expressed indifference towards ethics and privacy.

These findings suggest that the transition from consumer to prosumer must include a third dimension: becoming a critical and responsible prosumer.

8. From awareness to behaviour

A further finding from DIGI-Story is especially relevant for media education: young people's perceptions of their own abilities do not always correspond with demonstrated practices.

Across the participating countries, respondents reported relatively high confidence in their understanding of algorithms, but the study identified more limited capacity to explain or practically apply that knowledge. The report describes this as a systematic gap between perception and competence.

The focus groups with media literacy, education and youth experts reinforced this conclusion. Experts identified a structural gap between awareness and behaviour and highlighted algorithm literacy, fact-checking, digital identity, ethical content creation and emotional resilience as priority areas.

Crucially, their recommendation was not simply to provide young people with more information.

They called for a shift from knowledge-based towards action-based learning, supported by experiential and scenario-based education.

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This distinction has important consequences for the design of media literacy programmes. Knowing that misinformation exists is different from checking a claim before sharing it. Knowing that digital footprints exist is different from actively managing privacy. Understanding copyright conceptually is different from applying it when producing a video.

Effective media literacy therefore requires opportunities to practise responsible digital behaviour.

9. Transmedia as educational practice

Transmedia approaches may provide one route for creating these opportunities.

Instead of positioning learners exclusively as recipients of information about media literacy, transmedia education can invite them to become creators. A learning process might require participants to investigate a social issue, verify information, construct a narrative, adapt different elements to video, audio, graphics or social media, consider copyright and privacy, and evaluate how their content could circulate between audiences.

This approach changes the learner's position.

The question is no longer simply, "*Do you understand how digital media work?*" It becomes, "*Can you use digital media critically and responsibly to communicate something meaningful?*"

The DIGI-Story findings provide support for this direction. There is substantial demand for structured digital literacy learning: 76% of Portuguese respondents and 66.1% of Czech respondents supported additional training. Participants also expressed preferences for video-based, interactive and transmedia approaches rather than relying predominantly on conventional PDF-based resources.

Interest is not identical across countries, however. Spain showed the strongest reported interest in transmedia approaches, with 44% interested or very interested, whereas 52% of Czech respondents reported not being interested.

This variation is important. Transmedia education should not assume universal motivation or identical digital cultures. Learning strategies need sufficient flexibility to respond to different interests, skills and patterns of platform use.

10. Implications for DIGI-Story

These findings have directly informed the educational approach of DIGI-Story.

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The Common Report identifies five cross-country challenges: overconfidence in digital skills, passive behaviour towards misinformation, weak prosumer identity, limited ethical and environmental awareness, and insufficient behavioural application of knowledge.

Consequently, the project proposes an Online Behaviour Guide focused on practical skills and behavioural change rather than knowledge transmission alone. The report recommends real-life scenarios, interactive exercises and transmedia storytelling while addressing both technical and emotional dimensions of digital participation.

This provides a useful model for understanding the transition from consumer to prosumer.

The objective is not to transform every young person into a professional content creator. Nor should digital participation be measured simply by the frequency with which someone publishes material.

Instead, media literacy education can help young people understand that creating, sharing, commenting and redistributing information are meaningful forms of participation carrying both opportunities and responsibilities.

The desired transition is therefore not merely from consumer to producer, but from passive or habitual participation towards critical, creative and responsible participation.

11. Conclusions

Young people's relationship with contemporary media cannot adequately be described through the traditional distinction between producers and audiences. Social media provide unprecedented opportunities to move between consumption, interaction, circulation and creation, making the concept of the prosumer increasingly relevant.

However, the evidence reviewed in this article suggests that technological access and intensive social media use should not be mistaken for active or critically informed participation.

The DIGI-Story study illustrates this tension particularly clearly. Young people across the Czech Republic, Spain and Portugal are highly active within digital environments, yet relatively few identify as active creators. At the same time, gaps persist in production skills, information verification, ethical decision-making and the practical understanding of digital systems.

These findings are consistent with research on transmedia literacy showing that young people's digital competences are diverse and unevenly distributed. The challenge for educators and youth workers is therefore not simply to introduce young people to

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technologies they already use, but to help transform existing everyday practices into more reflective forms of participation.

Transmedia approaches offer particular potential because they can combine analysis with production. Young people can learn about misinformation by verifying information, about copyright by creating content, about algorithms by examining circulation and visibility, and about digital responsibility by considering the consequences of what they publish.

Becoming a prosumer, from this perspective, is not simply about producing more content. It is about developing the capacity to understand, create and circulate digital content critically, ethically and purposefully.

For projects such as DIGI-Story, this represents an essential step towards empowering young people as active and responsible digital citizens.

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