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Understanding Information Literacy with Search Stories

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The amount of available information today is overwhelming: assessing the quality of information has become a pressing issue, as the pandemic and related infodemic have illustrated. Searching and evaluating information is a core life activity, fundamental for a democratic society (White, 2016). Information literacy (IL) has been named one of the critical skills of our century (Ananiadou & Claro, 2009), key to pursue effective life-long learning (Kurbanoglu, 2012), and central for today's education.

Research so far has been based on the (self-)assessment of IL skills, on measuring IL self-efficacy and on capturing online search behaviours with monitoring tools (URL timestamping or eye-tracking), mostly using academic or job tasks as a benchmark.

To support effective IL education, we need to understand how online information search actually happens in everyday life. While IL models seem to converge on the key steps in searching information (e.g., SCONUL, 2011), we still know very little about how young people actually search information online. This happens today mostly on personal devices, and in relation to small tasks: searching is a rather ubiquitous and capillary activity. Moreover, search engines have grown complex and opaque, implementing questionable AI algorithms and user profiling.

In this paper, we present the collection of search stories as an innovative method to investigate IL practices, designed within the LOIS FNS project to preserve the ecology of data collection during information search tasks in a complex and diversified environment (Botturi et al., 2021).

LOIS participants (age 16-20) were asked to install an extension in their browser at home, and then to solve 4 search tasks. Their navigation actions were recorded and time-coded, then compiled in stories, enriched with both manual and automatic metadata, visualized into plots, and analyzed statistically, as well as with Machine Learning algorithms to extract relevant features. Correlations with user personal and psychometric profiles were also tested.

The presentation will bring examples from a study on fake news (150 stories), and from the LOIS main data collection (608 stories). While IL can be conceptualized as a consistent construct, our results indicate that its actual practices and success are much more nuanced, depending on searcher, task and situation. Search stories reveal online information search more as a subtle art than an exact science, guided by principles more than rules. Such insights might support the development of a more responsive and flexible IL teaching approach.

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