

#TRUSTINTRUTH: MEDIA COMPETENCE OF INVISIBLE YOUTH

Raphaela Tkotzyk, Kim Hebben, & Johanna Lategahn
Institute for Diversity Studies, TU Dortmund University (Germany)

Abstract

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube dominate information acquisition for young adults and adolescents, serving as both world-view generators (Rath, 2000) and socialization agents. More than 1 billion hours of YouTube content are consumed daily worldwide, and social media use has become a pervasive feature of everyday life for billions of users (UNESCO, 2021; Lysenstoen et al., 2021). This “always-on” culture intertwines media use with political socialization and amplifies the risks posed by disinformation, fake news, and extremist narratives, including right-wing populism (Bruns, Gläsel & Strobel, 2017; Kränge et al., 2021; Tsagkroni, 2022; Berninger & Reichelt, 2022). At the same time, the ability to critically assess media content, navigate contradictory information, and identify misleading or manipulative narratives has become a key democratic competence. The research project #TrustinTruth, funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, bpb) addresses this challenge by focusing explicitly on youth whose perspectives often remain underrepresented in large-scale studies on media use and political orientation. Major studies such as JIM (Feierabend et al., 2024) or the Shell Youth Study (Albert et al., 2024) provide important general insights, yet they largely overlook marginalized youth from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds or with special educational needs. This creates a significant research gap regarding their media competence, understood here as the ability to “read” media, process conflicting information, detect fake news, and develop political judgment in relation to peers, parents, teachers, and digital media environments. The paper presents findings from an exploratory pilot study that formed the preparatory empirical phase of #TrustinTruth. This pilot was designed as a first systematic test run for the main project in order to gain an initial orientation regarding relevant themes, patterns of media-related judgment, and possible competence profiles among 11- to 15-year-olds at what has been described as a media-biographical turning point (Feierabend et al., 2024). Using the innovative “Picturizing Strategy”—a visual, low-threshold interview method grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystemic model and concept mapping (Tkotzyk et al., 2024)—we conducted 20 baseline interviews (n=20) in inclusive educational settings. Although the pilot primarily served to prepare the main study, it already generated substantial findings that reveal noteworthy patterns in how these often “invisible” youth groups orient themselves within complex media environments. By making visible the perspectives of adolescents who are frequently overlooked in large-scale media studies, the study contributes to current debates on inclusive media education and political learning and offers impulses for educational practice in line with the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and of Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO, 2021; Goll, 2022; Oberle, 2017).

Keywords: *Media competence, marginalized youth, fake news, media education, political judgment.*

1. Introduction

Democracy currently faces significant challenges, including populism, hate speech, polarization, and a declining trust in political institutions (Fischer & Reinhardt, 2020). In recent years, we have witnessed the rise of various ideologies across Europe that influence people constantly.

Digital media, particularly social media, serves as a primary platform for extremist ideologies while simultaneously acting as an agent of information transmission and a worldview generator (Rath, 2000). As media functions as a central socialization agent, the ability to critically reflect and evaluate information, navigate contradictions, and identify manipulative narratives has become a fundamental democratic competence (Tkotzyk & Lategahn, 2025).

Despite their importance, major studies like JIM (Feierabend et al., 2024) or the Shell Youth Study (Albert et al., 2024) largely overlook marginalized young people from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds or with special educational needs. This creates a big research gap regarding their specific

media competence, which here means the ability to “read” media, process conflicting information, spot fake news, and develop political judgment in relation to peers, parents, teachers, and digital media environments. The research project #TrustinTruth, funded by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, bpb) addresses this problem by focusing explicitly on these “invisible” young adults.

The project pursues three main objectives. (1) Investigating media’s role in political opinion formation and the recognition of disinformation through qualitative interviews. (2) Developing a Social Media Literacy Kit (SMLK) for school settings based on these findings. (3) Strengthening teachers’ media literacy.

This paper presents initial findings from a preliminary study (October 2025 - January 2026) involving 20 young adults. Using an adapted “Picturizing Strategy” (Tkotzyk, Lategahn, Marci-Boehncke, 2024), the study reveals noteworthy results in how the target group navigates complex digital environments.

2. Youth, media use and political orientation

Digital media have permeated everyday life of children, adolescents, and adults (Sponholz & Boenisch, 2021), shaping social structures, perceptions, and cognitive processes (Zorn, Schluchter & Bosse, 2019). This development is part of a broader transformation from linear to non-linear, platform-based, and increasingly individualized media use. According to UNESCO (2021), more than one billion hours of video content are watched on YouTube every day worldwide, illustrating the immense relevance of digital platforms as contemporary media environments.

In Germany the JIM Study 2024 confirms this Shift toward platform-base communication: WhatsApp (96%), Instagram (62%), TikTok (54%), and Snapchat (52%) dominate the media environments of 12- to 19-year-olds (Feierabend et al., 2024).

This shift impacts political socialization, as content is increasingly consumed through algorithmically curated feeds, memes, and influencer communication. In these hybrid contexts entertainment and political persuasion overlap, making it difficult for adolescents to identify extremist political or manipulative content.

2.1. Media competence vs. media literacy

To address these challenges, it is vital to distinguish between two relevant concepts: (1) Media competence that refers to the individual’s cognitive and technical abilities to use, understand, and critique media (Baacke, 1996). (2) Media literacy that is often used in international contexts. This broader concept emphasizes the sociocultural practice and the democratic agency required to navigate media environments autonomously. In digital environments, these terms encompass the ability to evaluate sources, distinguish opinion from fact, and reflect algorithmic personalization as a fundamental democratic requirement.

2.2. The digital divide and marginalized youth

However, access to and critical use of digital media are systematically stratified by intersecting social inequalities – including gender, ethnicity, disability, and socio-economic status. These dimensions compound to produce unequal distribution of material, social, and cultural capital (Robinson et al., 2020). This multidimensional and intersectionally structured inequality in the digital realm is commonly conceptualized as the “digital divide” (Hargittai, 2002).

Adolescents with special educational needs or from precarious backgrounds are active participants in digital culture; yet their media practices, interpretive strategies, and vulnerabilities remain insufficiently visible in large-scale research. Understanding how these “invisible” groups assess credibility and recognize filter bubbles is essential for developing responsible, inclusive media education.

3. Marginalized youth as an underrepresented group in media studies

With over 600,000 students receiving special educational support in Germany (Statista, 2024), this group is a significant educational reality, yet remains underrepresented in media literacy and civic education research. This invisibility contradicts the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which mandates full social and political participation. Nevertheless, the political agency of people with disabilities has historically often been underestimated, while their perspectives, communicative needs, and barriers to participation have not always been sufficiently considered in political institutions and civic education contexts (BMAS, 2016; Stegkemper, 2022).

Digital participation is further stratified by socio-economic background. Disadvantaged adolescents often have less access to technical devices and fewer opportunities to develop media-related competencies in supportive educational contexts (Booth et al., 2020). Their media practices may lean toward stereotypical entertainment formats (Wagner, 2010), which can limit opportunities for encountering diverse, reflective, and politically informative content.

This resource gap increases vulnerability to fake news, propaganda, and radicalizing narratives. Without adequate educational support and dialogic reflection, distinguishing between fact and manipulative framing becomes significantly more difficult (Krange et al., 2021; Berninger & Reichelt, 2022, Tsagkroni, 2022).

At the same time, adolescents with special educational needs and adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds should not be framed as passive, deficient, or homogeneous media users. The central problem lies in the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and institutional support. To foster inclusive democratic education, we must understand how these “invisible” groups navigate digital media environments, encounter and evaluate political content, and how they make sense of phenomena such as fake news, filter bubbles, and manipulative narratives. This is precisely where the #TrustinTruth project intervenes.

4. Methodological approach: The picturizing strategy

To address the research gap and capture the perspectives of “invisible youth,” this study employs the “Picturizing Strategy” (PS). Originally a tool for exploring political consciousness in early childhood (Tkotzyk, Lategahn, & Marci-Boehncke, 2024), the PS is a visual, low-threshold interview method. It enables participants to express experiences and judgments through images, reducing abstract verbal reasoning barriers.

4.1. Theoretical foundation and adaption

The PS is grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s ecosystemic model (1979) but conceptualizes mediality as a dimension that permeates all systemic levels rather than a separate factor. While previous applications of the PS focused on a basic understanding of social rules, this study adapts the focus for 11- to 15-year-olds toward media-related judgment, information practices, and awareness of manipulative narratives.

4.2. Practical application and material

The PS functions as a communication-supported mapping activity:

- **Material:** Participants select from image cards representing digital media platforms, influencers, fake news, cyberbullying, or algorithmic personalization. These cards were co-creatively developed in student-led participation process, ensuring they reflect current digital lifeworlds.
- **Process:** Participants place cards on a “game board” while “thinking aloud”. This mapping explores the micro-level (family, peers), meso-level (school, teacher), and broader societal influences.
- **Benefits:** The playful, action-oriented format reduces the researcher-participant-asymmetry and cognitive-linguistic barriers, making it ideal for youth with special educational needs.

The adapted PS provides access to both verbal reflections and visual mappings, allowing the recurring patterns in media use, information practices, awareness of fake news and filter bubbles, and the role of family, peers, teachers, and digital platforms in processes of orientation. The following findings are based on the preliminary study (n=20).

5. First insights from the preliminary study

The pilot study (n=20) reveals a contradictory picture: intensive media use coexists with limited critical reflection, highlighting the “digital divide” in practice. The findings can be grouped into three central patterns:

5.1. Hybrid media use: Entertainment vs. information

As hypothesized, social media dominates the participants’ everyday lives, primarily for entertainment. One participant described media mainly as a way of “playing games and watching movies” (mC14), while another referred to TikTok as something used simply “to waste time” (mT14). However, platforms such as TikTok have simultaneously become an important source to “see what is going on” and to follow “news” content (mE15). This finding confirms that political information is now predominantly

encountered through incidental, algorithmically curated feeds, short videos, and influencer-based communication rather than traditional formats

5.2. Limited reflection and “algorithmic truth”

A significant lack of critical reflection and political judgment was evident. Political claims were often reproduced uncritically, such as a distorted political statement regarding Friedrich Merz about changing weekends and Fridays (mE15). Credibility was rarely assessed on the basis of factual or journalistic criteria; instead, trust was linked to visibility and emotional impact. One participant explained that media content seemed trustworthy because it constantly “shows what is happening” and “talks about it everywhere” (mE15). In this sense, algorithmic presence was implicitly equated with truthfulness. Although the term “fake news” was known, concrete detection strategies remained vague, for example when one adolescent stated that people should “not listen to too much of it because of fake news” (mE15). Furthermore, news was often evaluated emotionally rather than analytically, e.g. when participants described news as something that “helps” or “makes you feel less afraid” (mE15).

5.3. Validation space: Peers vs. school

The social environment plays a decisive role in information processing:

- Peer groups play a central role in validating information. They serve as a space where youth negotiate “what is true and what is right” (mE15).
- Schools remain largely irrelevant for media literacy. While devices such as iPads or learning apps are used in class (mH14; wS11), the application is strictly functional. In fact, media education is not available (wA11).

The interviews also showed that adolescents perceive digital media as attractive because they are “fun” and “not so theoretical” (mP16). This statement marks a sharp divide between institutional learning and youth’ digital lifeworlds.

6. Conclusion and outlook #TrustinTruth

The preliminary findings confirm that while marginalized adolescents are deeply integrated into digital media cultures, their media competence remains largely functional. The lack of reflective and analytical strategies for evaluating political content and misinformation underscores a significant democratic deficit.

These results validate the #TrustinTruth approach and its focus on “invisible” youth. To bridge this gap, the development of the Social Media Literacy Kit (SMLK) must directly integrate the target group’s actual media practices, specifically targeting source evaluation, and the deconstruction of manipulative narratives.

Furthermore, the perceived marginality of schools in fostering media literacy highlights a critical need for teacher professionalization. By providing empirically grounded, practice-oriented materials, #TrustinTruth contributes to a more inclusive and democratic media education, ensuring that those most vulnerable to disinformation are no longer overlooked.

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