Learning to Google: Understanding classed and gendered practices when young people use the Internet for research

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## Sample

26 young people aged 16-18 from an elite fee-paying school and from a vocational college in the UK

## Implications For Policy Makers About

Stepping up awareness and empowerment

# Abstract

This article builds on existing research by examining two groups of young people, one from an elite fee-paying school and the other from a vocational college, as they engage with information on the Web about, for example, conspiracies, climate change and immigration. The data include the results of group and individual interviews, digital search terms and web (http) traffic, videos of discussions and downloads of arguments on social media. This study’s contribution is to synthesise digital methods and sociological concepts of technology, information and youth with Bourdieu’s social theory. By capturing offline and online events and decisions as they are manifested online (and vice versa), this study challenges distinctions between ‘the virtual’ and ‘the real’. It reveals how young people’s class of conditions, including their relative position in the United Kingdom’s educational hierarchy are played out in the way they use digital technology to produce intersecting classed and gendered practices.

# Outcome

Young people’s class of conditions and position in the educational hierarchy produce classed and gendered effects of digital technology use. “the working class young people in this study relied
more on Google for answers than their peers whose parents were from the professional
class. This problem was compounded within this study because the majority of the working-
class students made little or no effort to verify sources that provided them information.
This partly because these students had been conditioned to accept Google’s authority
but more importantly the information they found took on a social life of its own. The
discourses young people encountered didn’t respect any boundaries between offline/
online or between different devices and platforms. Information that had a digital source
would be shared by word of mouth around college, between friends and family outside
of college, by private phone messaging services such as Snapchat, or on Facebook and
Twitter.” (Davies, 2018: 2777). “Alternatively, because they were so invested in the logic of practice of education, the young men at Chancery treated my study as assessment of their ability to think analytically.
Their knowledge was, however, highly specialised and attuned the demands of an
elite university’s selection procedure during which their subject knowledge and cognitive
skills would be put to the test. So, they could explain in detail how WiFi works by
electromagnetism, but they had no knowledge of how PageRank worked or any knowledge
of the Google’s other search algorithms such as Hummingbird, Panda, Pigeon, and
Pirate. These are widely discussed in the search engine optimisation (SEO) community
but, problematically, they remain unavailable for public scrutiny.” (Davies, 2018: 2777). “