

# The terrible assumptions of digital literacy



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This post is about ridding ourselves of dumb assumptions about digital literacy – who knows about tech and who doesn't. Mostly, all assumptions are wrong, and do harm to how society progresses as a digital community

Recently I've been dealing with various projects that relate to digital skill and literacies, and am fairly overwhelmed at how many ignorant assumptions swirl around this terrain. Some people think that the older generation are all completely digitally illiterate, and by default, younger people know a lot more – mainly because they are always on their phones. Other people assume that older women must be completely digitally illiterate by virtue of being women as well as old(er). Some older people assume all young people are digitally literate because of the old-fashioned idea about being a digital native, and that older people struggle because they are digital immigrants. Younger people see older people using a phone and tapping with one finger (me!) and assume we are totally device dumb, and struggle with a phone if it doesn't have big numbers on the keyboard.

## Women v Men

A while back I was working with some young webdevs and we ended up discussing the difference between being a DotNet dev and a LAMP stack dev. This is tech speak for whether or not you use Microsoft servers and code in ASPX or wotnot (and probably live inside Visual Basic) or if you work predominantly with PHP, MySQL or NoSQL etc. CSS and JavaScript aren't an issue in this context (well, might be, but I'm not aware of it). One of the young guys said to me he had never met a woman, especially 'my age' who was as technical as me. Now if you are a webdev of some years, you will know that women were not unknown in earlier iterations of webdev and internet culture – I'd estimate 15-20%, depending on area (geo or tech). So, having to now deal with new generations of young people – guys or girls – who don't know that women went before them is a bit frustrating. But, they're young, and need telling, that is all. For me to also have to deal with people who *\*should know better\** is deeply concerning. For example, more established technical staff in institutions or web companies, or other professionals who remain ignorant of the realities of technical work and who did it/ does it or could do it.

## Older people

Older people continuously suffer from patronising assumptions, this much becomes clear as one gets older. Age does not equate to stupidity, often it means the exact opposite. I quote the brilliant Billy Bob Thornton in Goliath when he says 'old ain't dead'. That kind of sums it up, beyond the age of fifty we are not all falling into a deep fog of dementia. Young people need to be aware of this. I have had to point this out fairly explicitly sometimes, and even then, it seems hard for some young gun tech devs (male) to grasp. This is a real shame, as the future world all us females have helped to build – the internet, websites, video on the web, audio, fancy CSS, etc, is not appreciated for the non-gender specific world it really is, it's still seen as a guy thing. Women are some of the leading coders of the world historically, and we don't celebrate this for some reason.

## Younger people

Younger people can be very digitally illiterate. I've had students in (digital media UG Yr 0) class who did not know how to use a desktop browser, or what it even was, or how to open a weblink. On a phone these things seem to happen 'by magic' and therefore users have lost the awareness of which app is doing what and why. It's eye opening to see how ignorant some young people are about what is actually happening tech-wise on their phones. This also has massive serious implications as we move into a world of work and daily life where many, many aspects of it are digitized.

## Death of Usability

A final comment about how the digital world is actually becoming harder to interact with. User experience for digital apps and websites is down the toilet - usability has been sacrificed for endless pop up harassment, email subscriptions, notification blocking, permissions access, chatbot interactions, or pointless cookie and data directives. All of this is meaningless, generally of zero benefit to the user. Put that together with an expanding nightmare of how we deal with digital money, which as it increases in use also increases in exponential problems of security, authenticity and sheer horror chaos for user experience navigation understanding, and you have a timebomb of digital meltdown. Ladies and Gentleman, we are entering dystopia, please fasten your seatbelts, it's gonna be a bumpy ride.

*Further reading: [ICDL, Perceptions & Reality of the Digital Skills Gap](#)*

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