



News Literacy Project Trains Young People to Be Skeptical Media Consumers

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A program called the News Literacy Project is training young people in several major cities how to separate fact from fiction in the news they consume. Jeffrey Brown reports.

TRANSCRIPT

JEFFREY BROWN: Now, information is coming at young people from everywhere these days, but where to look and what to believe?

COLIN O'BRIEN, News Literacy Project: You want news sources that are transparent. You want to be able to see who is doing the reporting, see what their agenda is, see who funds them, see if they are, in fact, a credible source or not.

JEFFREY BROWN: How can young people learn to be better consumers of news and information?

A recent class at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, is trying to do just that: helping students distinguish news from opinion, fact from fiction, amid the daily onslaught of TV, radio, newspapers, and social media.

Social studies teacher Colin O'Brien began with a real-life example, a fast-moving email, in fact, a hoax, claiming that all schools in Great Britain had removed study of the Holocaust from their curriculum because the Muslim population claimed it never occurred.

COLIN O'BRIEN: Raise your hand if you thought this was true, because your teacher gave it to you and it was an email, so it must have been true.

JEFFREY BROWN: How did the hoax become accepted as fact? O'Brien had his students do a very common Google search, entering the terms Holocaust, denial and England.

Voila. He came up with an article in the British tabloid newspaper The Daily Mail.

STUDENT: Schools are dropping the Holocaust from history lessons to avoid offending Muslim peoples, a government-backed study has revealed.

COLIN O'BRIEN: Did the email provide documentation?

STUDENT: No.

COLIN O'BRIEN: No.

JEFFREY BROWN: The lesson is part of an effort called the News Literacy Project, a four-year-old program now taught to middle and high school students in 21 inner-city and suburban schools in the Washington, D.C., area, New York City, and Chicago.

It was started by former Los Angeles Times investigative reporter and Pulitzer Prize winner Alan Miller.

ALAN MILLER, News Literacy Project: A century ago, Mark Twain said that a lie can get halfway around the world while truth is still putting on its shoes. In this hyperlinked information age, a lie can get all the way around the world and back while truth is still getting out of bed.

There is so much potential here for misinformation, for propaganda, for spin, all of the myriad sources that are out there. More and more of, the onus is shifting to the consumer.

JEFFREY BROWN: And a slew of recent studies supports the notion that young people seek out traditional news sources less and less and that they have a difficult time knowing how to judge the legitimacy of the information that does come at them.

In response, the News Literacy Project, funded by a combination of foundations, corporations and individuals, develops lesson plans for teachers like Eliza Ford at the E.L. Haynes Public Charter School in Washington, D.C.

ELIZA FORD, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School: We learned about how important it is to see every bit of information that we get on Facebook, on Twitter, in our email box as news and making sure that we really figure out how to know what to believe.

STUDENT: Now, when I watch the news, I listen for opinions and try to see if they put more of opinion in there than — more than fact.

JEFFREY BROWN: The program also brings journalists into the classroom to run workshops.

On the day of our visit, Pierre Thomas, senior justice correspondent for ABC News, explained why savvy news consumers should be wary of quotes from anonymous sources.

PIERRE THOMAS, ABC News: Why is sourcing so important, particularly on a story like this?

STUDENT: If you didn't cite the sources, people would think, "oh, they're just trying to make another big news story to add on to all the hype that they're putting on." If you do put the sources, people are like, "we know that this has a factual basis."

PIERRE THOMAS: A lot is at stake, because to the degree the public is educated about how they get their information and having the proper tools to discern what they should be paying particular attention to, that's going to inform how they vote for president. That's going to inform how they vote for city council. That could inform how they vote for who is on their school board.

JEFFREY BROWN: Several students said they were getting the message.

TASNEEM ROBINSON, student: I want to get something out of it that's important, so that I will start maybe not exactly to like the news, but to understand it more. Well, it does concern you because it happened around your community, and your community affects you.

ARIELLE GARCIA, student: So, now, when I get a forward on my text messages or my phone or my computer, I will actually read it and it will say something. If I don't believe it, just delete it.

JEFFREY BROWN: For her part, Jennifer Niles, the founder and head of the E.L. Haynes School, said the benefits go beyond news literacy.

JENNIFER NILES, E.L. Haynes Public Charter School: The News Literacy Project and the curriculum that our teachers have been developing with them would fit into middle school curriculum across the country and have a huge focus on nonfiction reading and writing, which we now understand are so much more central to making sure that our kids are going to be prepared for college, but also competitive in the workplace. This fits perfectly.

JEFFREY BROWN: In fact, the idea of making this into a national program got a recent boost from Michael Copps, a member of the Federal Communications Commission.

MICHAEL COPPS, FCC: And we need to focus on bringing all these together in the public sector and in the private sector to develop an online news literacy curriculum that can be made available across the nation. This can be a powerful antidote to the dumbing down of our civic dialogue that has taken place.

Peter Kenah, Whitman High School: And the editorials, what state's governor will no longer authorize executions?

JEFFREY BROWN: That's the goal back at Whitman High School, where teacher Peter Kenah engaged students any way he could, from a news scavenger hunt to a crossword puzzle with key concepts.

STUDENT: Corrections?

STUDENT: Editorial?

STUDENT: Documentation.

STUDENT: Is it anonymous?

STUDENT: Balance.

JEFFREY BROWN: His students learned lessons learned even through rap.

STUDENT (singing): Good for quick information, but it doesn't have any citations. So,

therefore, it's not reliable, and its sources are not viable.

JEFFREY BROWN: The News Literacy Project's Miller said a lot is riding on this effort.

ALAN MILLER: If young people don't value quality journalism, don't look for it, don't actually demand it, then it may cease to exist. If they don't — can't distinguish between the value of work that is gathered with these kinds of standards and in an effort to present it dispassionately and fairly and with different points of view, then why would they ever seek out quality journalism?

JEFFREY BROWN: To further the effort, the News Literacy Project and the American Library Association are launching workshops around the country to make high school students better media watchdogs, with a specific focus on the 2012 political campaign.