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Schools demanding news literacy lessons to teach students how to find fact amid fiction

By [Lynh Bui](#), Published: April 15, 2013

When Ife Adelona saw a picture of singer Selena Gomez as an adult magazine covergirl circulating on Twitter, the 17-year-old knew what she had to do.

“I immediately went for a second source to make sure it wasn’t true,” Ife said.

A quick web search confirmed the Montgomery Blair High School student’s instincts: The photo was a fake.

“Second source” is more a journalist’s jargon than part of a teen’s everyday vocabulary. But with information so readily available via social media, the internet and traditional news sources, educators say news literacy — teaching students how to identify credible information and good journalism — is increasingly important.

News literacy programs are expanding in classrooms across the country, with a growing nonprofit sector dedicated to the cause and new education standards that require students to read and analyze more nonfiction text.

“Younger students might feel that all information is created equally,” said Alan C. Miller, president of the [News Literacy Project](#) and a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who worked as an investigative reporter with the Los Angeles Times. “If something is put on the internet, they tend to believe it.”

Miller’s Maryland-based nonprofit organization develops lesson plans, activities and curriculum for middle and high schools, teaching students to “sort fact from fiction in the digital age.” Students learn to spot bias in stories, discover what makes sources credible and verify information.

“We focus heavily on using the standards of quality journalism to assess the credibility of all news and information,” Miller said.

The program also partners with journalists who visit classrooms as part of the lessons, including editors and reporters from about two dozen news organizations such as the New York Times, ProPublica, NPR, CBS News and [The Washington Post](#).

NBC News national correspondent Tracie Potts has volunteered with the News Literacy Project since 2009. On a recent Thursday, she visited Ife’s media literacy class in Silver Spring.

Potts brought examples of different polls about sequestration from sources such as Gallup, MSNBC, Fox News and Business Insider. She then urged students to ask critical questions: “Who can I trust?” “Where is

this information coming from?” “How can we say that one source of news is better than another?”

Being a smart news consumer is akin to being discriminating about other choices in life, she told students: “It’s sort of like going out to eat. You don’t want to stop anywhere along the side of the road. You’re going to scrutinize where your food is coming from.”

Demand to teach that sort of healthy skepticism and critical thinking is on the rise.

When the News Literacy Project first launched in classrooms, it reached about 650 students in Maryland and New York in 2009. Four years later, the project has expanded to Chicago, Virginia and Washington, D.C., and it is expected to reach about 3,800 students by the end of the school year.

The new Common Core education standards have driven that demand, Miller said. Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core, which requires [nonfiction to comprise 70 percent](#) of what a student reads by senior year.

Principals and teachers say lessons from news literacy extend beyond teaching students about journalism.

At Walt Whitman High School, where principal Alan Goodwin first hosted News Literacy Program pilot lessons, Goodwin said he sees his students applying what they have learned in the classes — fact checking, research, using multiple sources — as they write papers or make decisions in their everyday lives.

“It helps students understand what they should believe and not believe and what sort of research they should do,” Goodwin said.

Virginia has not adopted Common Core, but Fairfax County recently added a requirement to teach students media literacy. The News Literacy Project plans to expand there this spring.

In October, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation announced it would spend \$6 million over three years on a project called “[Why News Matters](#).” The funds will go to schools, universities and nonprofits throughout Chicago for youth journalism programs and education.

“People are overloaded and bombarded with information,” said Clark Bell, the McCormick Foundation’s journalism program director. “Whether you’re older, younger and in between, the challenge of keeping up and engaged is essential.”

Preliminary research from Stony Brook University, home of the [Center for News Literacy](#), shows that students who have taken a news literacy course are more likely to register to vote and learn about current events.

As she learns more about news literacy, Ife said she wants other students to understand the importance of thinking twice about what they see and what they hear.

“Sometimes as a student taking in a lot of information, you trust a lot of different sources that you shouldn’t trust,” Ife said. “They can be easily fooled.”

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