

In age of fake news, teaching media literacy + quiz

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PROVIDENCE, R.I. - Real or fake: "Obama Signs Executive Order Banning the Pledge of Allegiance in Schools Nationwide."

"Whaaat?" asked one skeptical student in Kelly J. Reed's sophomore English class.

"It's a fake," declared 10th Grader Kenny Ross.

"So ABC News is not reliable?" asked Humza Habib, as he stared hard at the internet address for this rather stunning pronouncement by a website calling itself "abcnews.com.co."

This false headline was one of several that Reed, a 14-year teacher at Attleboro High School, displayed for her students during a 65-minute departure this week from her more traditional English class forays into the intricacies of "Lord of the Flies," "Othello" and "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian."

"Why does it matter?" she implored the sometimes distracted students swiping iPhone screens under their desks. "Eyeball me. Why is it important?"

Within the eggshell-painted, concrete block walls of her classroom in a school wracked this year by budget cuts and layoffs, Reed is waging a fight playing out cross America where teachers feel an urgent need to teach their students how to evaluate the accuracy and trustworthiness of the information coming at them non-stop.

Fake news is not a new phenomenon.

"It is as old as American journalism," notes University of Rhode Island Prof. Renee Hobbs, director of the media education lab at URI's Harrington School.

"The first newspapers that came out of colonial America, here in Rhode Island and Massachusetts and Connecticut, were terribly partisan and they had all kinds of misinformation, gossip and other salacious news that was sometimes made-up by people including our famous Ben Franklin who was a purveyor of fake news."
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"He had a woman's name - Mrs. Do-Good - that he used to write fake news under all the time," Hobbs said of Franklin, who is better known as one of the nation's founding fathers. "Thank heavens, quality journalism kept fake news in check for 200 years ... and the reason for that is simple economics: you're in the business of selling audiences to advertisers. And you do it by reporting on the news of the day in an accurate, fair and balanced way."

But the rapid-speed spread and proliferation of misinformation - and its perceived impact on the outcome of the 2016 presidential election - have made "fake news" one of the big stories of the year.

"Now millions of people can do it from their backyard," Hobbs said. It entertains. It confirms existing bias. In the partisan political realm: "I don't care if it's true if it supports my candidate."

Recent studies have documented the "threat to Democracy," as the authors of a Stanford University study described their findings. Among them: More than 80 percent of middle school students believed that "sponsored content" - a form of paid ad packaged to look like news - was the same as a real news story.

"Many people assume that because young people are fluent in social media they are equally perceptive about what they find there," said Prof. Sam Wineburg, the lead author of the report. "Our work shows the opposite to be true."

Joseph Kahne, of the University of California, and Benjamin Bowyer, of Santa Clara University, recently **published** the results of their own look at "youth judgments of the accuracy of truth claims tied to controversial public issues." Their online survey encompassed the responses of 2,101 people ages 15 to 27.

Among their findings: "Even when presented with a grossly inaccurate statement, a clear majority of youth [58 percent] in the ... survey agreed that the statement was accurate when those claims were used to support perspectives that aligned with their ideological perspective."

Their warning: "In a media environment in which political misinformation circulates widely and rapidly and in which individuals can easily seek out news and perspectives from sources that champion their beliefs, this psychological tendency of individuals to accept claims that align with their beliefs as true, even when the claims are not accurate, will undermine the quality and ultimate productivity of democratic deliberation."

Real or fake: "Obama Signs Executive Order Banning The National Anthem at All Sporting Events Nationwide."

Real or fake: "Fireman Suspended & Jailed By Atheist Mayor For Praying At Scene of Fire."

Reed gave her 10th-grade students a hint: the purported "ABCNews" reporter who wrote these news stories described himself this way in an accompanying bio: "Born at an early age, Jimmy Rustling has found solace and comfort knowing that his humble actions have made this multiverse a better place for every man, woman and child ever known to exist."

Another clue: all of these purported news stories had a fake internet address that that ended in "co" - as in "ABCNews.com.co" - not the real ABCnews URL.

She also displayed this headline: "Octopus in the Parking Garage is Climate Change's Canary in the Coal Mine."

Turns out the photo of the splayed octopus - taken in a flooded Miami parking garage - was real, as was the Miami Herald headline. It was based on the prediction by a University of Miami biologist that Floridians would see other "strange new creatures making sporadic appearances as rising sea levels push ocean waters deeper and more frequently onto land, along with some of the creatures that live in them."

Reed's initial impetus for tackling "fake news" in the classroom was personal: a Facebook debate with the "outraged" husband of a good friend who believed the bogus "news" story about President Obama banning the pledge of allegiance in schools.

"I kept my tongue for the sake of our relationship, and then ... I messaged him and said: this is just not real.... Look at the URL.... This part right here - ".co" - tells you this is not the ABC site.

"He's not a bad human being. He just was offended by the idea that someone would be so politically correct as to take the pledge down. And because he leans right, and doesn't love the president, it was easier for him to believe this not be true and not be as skeptical."

But the depth of the problem began to hit her, she said, after Obama became president.

The kids would come to school "with these ideas that they had garnered from their own families or stuff they found on the internet. It became clear to me that the information they were getting was not 100-percent truthful. It wasn't trustworthy ... and they couldn't recognize the difference.

"They couldn't tell me why getting something from the New York Times was more reliable than getting something from a person [on] a YouTube channel."

Then, said Reed, came a wave of internet-shared conspiracy theories suggesting the Sandy Hook elementary-school shootings were "a hoax by the government to rile people up ... as an excuse to take people's guns away from them." That led to "claims that their children never existed [and] playgrounds getting vandalized that were dedicated to the children."

"We just don't have a foundation of truth," Reed said, during a break in her school day.

"It's really horrific. It's how Pizza-gate starts," she said of the false rumor that Hillary Clinton ran an underground child-sex ring that recently brought a gunman with an assault-style rifle on what he thought was a rescue-the-children mission from North Carolina to a neighborhood pizza parlor in Washington D.C.

So Reed, 37, a native of the Connecticut town next-door to Sandy Hook, began Monday's 8:30 a.m. English class by giving the students 10 minutes of quiet time to read an **NPR story** on the year-long Stanford University study of 7,804 middle, high school and college students that found: "Students have a 'dismaying' inability to tell fake news from real."

The researchers began their work in January 2015, well before the influence of "fake news" on the 2016 election became a national news story.

One test question required middle schoolers "to explain why they might not trust an article on financial planning that was written by a bank executive and sponsored by a bank. The researchers found that many students did not cite authorship or article sponsorship as key reasons for not believing the article."

Another test had the students look at the homepage of Slate. The students were able to identify a traditional ad - one with a coupon code - from a news story pretty easily. But of the 203 students surveyed, more than 80 percent believed a native ad, identified with the words "sponsored content," was a real news story.

At the end of Monday's class, Reed asked each of her students to list their takeaways from Monday's lesson on an index card.

Along the way, she had talked about ways to identify the genuine web pages of public officials; the value in checking out how multiple print, TV and internet news organizations report a story; the potential danger in relying on unverified minute-by-minute reports of 24-hour news operations - her example: false early-reports about who was responsible for the Boston marathon bombing.

Here's a sampling of what her students wrote on their index cards:

"Today I learned that you can't trust certain news sources."

"Don't trust ads ... Don't trust live news ... Check for bias, reputation, evidence ... Look up more info on the topic to see if any other news is talking about the topic or not."

"Look for any evidence of bias."

"Do not believe every news source you read/hear. Instead, take into account reliability. Follow a trustworthy journalist on social media. Do not put trust in ['24-hour-coverage'] news."

"Verify information before sharing it."

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