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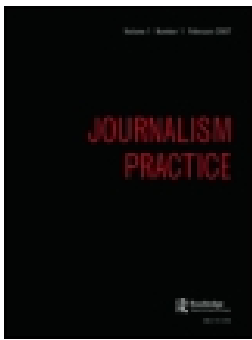
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Teaching Future Journalists the News: The Role of Journalism Educators in the News Literacy Movement

Kate Morris ^a and Frances Yeoman ^b

^aDepartment of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies, Goldsmiths, University of London, UK;

^bJournalism Department, Liverpool Screen School, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

ABSTRACT

The UK's nascent news literacy movement features a range of voices, including regulators, educationalists and journalists, but those of journalism educators working in higher education are largely absent. This study, based on a survey and semi-structured interviews with senior journalism educators from across UK universities, seeks to address this gap. This study's key research questions examined the extent to which news literacy is taught on UK undergraduate journalism programmes and the appetite of lecturers for increasing that teaching. It found that news literacy concepts are widely taught on UK journalism undergraduate programmes even if they are not named as such. Participants understand news literacy as encompassing instrumental skills alongside a critical approach to the news industry itself. It found little engagement between journalism educators in universities and the growing number of external news literacy projects. The study ends with a series of recommendations; chiefly, that journalism educators should be part of the development of material used in news literacy education for schools, libraries and elsewhere, and that journalism educators should consider offering short courses, seminars or online resources about news literacy within their own institutions that are applicable to students of other disciplines.

KEYWORDS

News literacy; journalism in HE; journalism lecturers; students; misinformation; disinformation

Introduction

The past four years have seen multiple reports from UK policy-makers, including from the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (House of Commons 2018, 2019); the Cairncross review into a sustainable future for journalism (Cairncross 2019) and the House of Lords Committee on Democracy and Digital Technologies (House of Lords 2020), calling for various forms of media or digital literacy education for children. Yet, there has been little concerted government action.

Meanwhile, new actors have moved into the field. A News Literacy Network, members of which are chiefly news publishers or third sector organisations who offer news literacy teaching in various formats, was established in August 2018. Members include Newswise,

CONTACT Kate Morris  k.morris@gold.ac.uk  @KateMorrisGold

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run by The Guardian Foundation. These programmes are limited in their reach, serving a small minority of UK school children (Yeoman and Morris 2020).

Further, these initiatives tend to teach a type of news literacy that offers young people a toolkit to spot misleading or false information – often termed “fake news” – wherever it might appear online, as distinct from news content from “trusted news sources” (The Charlotte Project 2020; Shout Out 2020). This kind of outreach work was defined by Jaakola (2020) as an attempt to restore the authority and legitimacy of journalism by establishing a boundary that distinguishes it from non-journalism and low-quality journalism.

There is little space in this educational landscape for a more nuanced version of news literacy such as that put forward by Craft, Ashley and Maksi, who argue that it must also foster a sceptical disposition and critical attitude towards news content itself (2017, 393).

A further consequence of this loose coalition of news organisations and third sector groups is that the meaning of news literacy has become diffuse and context-dependent, with its roots in the well-established tradition of media literacy often glossed over.

This study sets out to discover what senior journalism academics understand news literacy to be, and to what they perceive as its role in journalism education. It is hoped that the knowledge and experience of our respondents could be put to use within the wider news literacy movement.

From Media Literacy to News Literacy

The field of media literacy in its current form started taking shape in the US in the 1970s (Buckingham 2003; Hobbs and Jensen 2009). Prior to this, media education, or media literacy, was often seen as “education against the media” (Masterman 1985), something to inoculate children against the disease of media (Buckingham 2003). What changed during the 1970s, as Hobbs and Jensen write, is that media literacy education began being recognised as a critical practice of citizenship, part of the exercise of democratic rights and civil responsibilities (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 3). As many have noted, defining media literacy is far from straightforward (Buckingham 2003). One of the key debates within the field, as outlined by the leading media literacy scholar Renee Hobbs, is the perceived conflict between the “protectionist” and “empowerment” wings of the media literacy community (Hobbs and Jensen 2009, 1). Hobbs argues that media literacy can both sit within literacy education and constructivist learning theory, both supporting active democratic citizenship as well as creating informed consumers of mass media and popular culture. While the term media itself is also contested, it has broadly been understood to include the output of mass-circulation media organisations such as newspapers (Leaning 2009, 212).

Hence a version of news literacy has long been understood to be part of media literacy, and the emergence of the term news literacy in the early 2000s is part of a broader trend of “new” literacies – be they digital, critical, information or visual. In this context, the relatively new term of media and information literacy (MIL) should be noted. An umbrella concept championed by UNESCO, MIL incorporates a range of literacies, including news literacy, to create a new literacy construct “to empower people, communities and nations to participate in, and contribute to, global knowledge societies” (UNESCO 2021). UNESCO’s vision of MIL has a strong emphasis on equality – in this instance, between global communities, in terms of the media they can access and the tools they have to understand it. This definition of media literacy chimes with definitions of news

literacy from thinkers such as Paul Mihailidis (see below), who sees news literacy as cultivating active and engaged citizens.

News Literacy as a Standalone Term

Much like “media literacy”, news literacy is a term that “means many different things to different people” (Potter 2010, 675). For many educators and policy-makers, it is primarily a skillset to be taught in order that students make better-informed decisions about the information they access, particularly online. For academics, it is an area with theoretical and philosophical dimensions, which raises questions about journalism’s role within a democratic society. From a scholarly perspective, news literacy is a relatively new field of research; as such, the literature is limited (Fleming 2014, 148). Broadly speaking, however, it is commonly understood as a sub-category of media literacy (Maksl, Ashley, and Craft 2015, 30), with early mentions in the academy dating back to the 2000s. Then, scholars such as Mihailidis (2012, 10) were concerned with news literacy as an academic discipline with the power to bridge between theory, practice and pedagogy. For Mihailidis, the emergence of news literacy was a response to the growth of media throughout society. It can, he argued, help cultivate active, engaged citizens and journalists and create cross-national dialogue for good governance and civic participation (Mihailidis 2012, 14).

There is an emerging body of evidence that supports Mihailidis by indicating that news literacy at least correlates to important educational and civic outcomes. Martens and Hobbs found connections between news analysis skills and intent towards civic engagement (2015); Hobbs et al. found links between intent to participate in civic engagement and “positive attitudes about news, current events, reporting, and journalism” (2013).

It was furthermore a Mihailidis-style rationale that saw US initiatives such as the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy (Center for News Literacy 2020), founded in 2006, and the News Literacy Project (News Literacy Project 2020), established in 2008, attract extensive philanthropic funding long before the 2016 election of Donald Trump brought mis- and disinformation to the forefront of public debate. (Nielsen and Graves 2017). As the news literacy movement grew, Fleming scrutinised its purpose and rationale. The need for what she terms a specialised category under the umbrella of media literacy focussing on the news “rests on the premise that news plays an important role in democracy” (Fleming 2014, 148). Teaching people to understand the news, in short, is important only if you believe that news is important and distinct from other forms of information. This is a premise that has faced scrutiny, however, with news literacy projects in the USA particularly critiqued as a form of “pedagogical public relations” (Fleming 2012, 161) for a financially imperilled news industry.

Malik, Cortesi, and Gasser (2013) point out that these initiatives are often geared towards training news consumers to think like journalists. They critique this position, highlighting what they perceive as flaws in existing newsroom tenets such as objectivity (they argue that every source is biased and subjective). News literacy, they argue, should empower citizens to question rather than simply to understand journalistic norms. However, in examining different approaches to defining, framing and understanding core concepts such as news and news literacy, they ultimately advocate for “semantic interoperability” around the term news literacy, to acknowledge differences in perspectives, motivations, and practices (Malik, Cortesi, and Gasser 2013, 9).

The shifting definitions of news literacy outlined above are seen in the UK education and policy field, where there has been a blurring of boundaries between news literacy, with its specific focus on news media, and other forms of media and digital literacy or online reasoning. Indeed, there remains a debate about whether even these more widely-defined literacies should be taught on a subject-specific or cross-curricular basis, diffused throughout citizenship, computing and other teachings (Polizzi 2020).

Young People's News Literacy

It is difficult to build a complete image of young people's news literacy – as opposed to their experience with false online information – from the available literature. On the relatively narrow question of mis- and disinformation, recent findings have raised concerns.

Ofcom research from 2019 found that a quarter of 12–15 year-olds who visited websites or apps they had not used before did not consider whether they trusted the information found there to be true or accurate (Ofcom 2019a, 11). Half of 12- to 15-year-olds surveyed who used social media for news said it was difficult to tell whether that news was accurate, suggesting that some respondents were at least aware of the challenges they faced (Ofcom 2019a,10).

Meanwhile, our understanding of news literacy, and news habits, among British young people is limited by a patchy understanding of how they define news. Much of the research had examined how much news teenagers consumed, for example, without asking them to define what they meant by that. (Ofcom 2019a, National Literacy Trust 2020). Recent reports have begun plugging that gap and have shown changing habits as to where young people say they get news, and what they want from it. A Reuters Institute report that examined how young people (aged 18–35) engage with the news found similar attitudinal themes. It identified that young audiences see news as “what you should know (to an extent), but also what is useful to know, what is interesting to know, and what is fun to know.” Respondents saw a role for news that was “primarily individualistic” and about “what it can do for them as individuals – rather than for society as a whole” (Galan et al. 2019, 5).

News consumption and news literacy are not the same things. But the link between them is important, as is the information we have regarding the kind of news young people prefer. Research over generations has found that the young are “just not that into news” (Buckingham 2000; Marchi 2012) in a conventional sense. Elvestad and Phillips point to a repeating pattern with each wave of research voicing similar laments; youths are disengaged and “things are not what they used to be” (2018, 144). Marchi, meanwhile, found in a US context that if the news was given a “flexible” definition, including satirical TV news shows, YouTube content and Facebook, then her teenage participants could demonstrate real engagement plus an ability to critique the mainstream media (Marchi 2012, 248). A picture thus emerges of young people preferring opinion-led news content, which is primarily individualistic (Galan et al. 2019), often drawn from non-traditional platforms such as Facebook and YouTube (Marchi 2012). This trend cuts across those concerned about the future of public interest news – which is seen as vital to a functioning democracy (Cairncross 2019, 16–17).

The Journalism Education Field

There is little literature on the news literacy of journalism students or how news literacy concepts are incorporated into their education. There is, however, a large body of

literature concerned with the future of journalism education (Mensing 2010, 511), and the authors intend for this study to add to it. Parallels with the news literacy movement can be found in literature describing the tensions between cultural studies and traditional models of teaching journalism. Rowe labels these tensions in media education as “a persistent division” – between those interrogating media structures and practices, and those teaching occupational techniques based on “industry wisdom” (2004, 50).

For Mensing, writing in the US context, for historical and institutional reasons, most journalism programmes retain the structure of an industrial model of training. Even as these programmes reinvent themselves to reflect industry changes, core approaches remain. Adding multimedia or digital storytelling techniques does not change the basic model, she argues (Mensing 2010, 512).

Similar approaches can be seen in the UK. Greenberg, in a survey of 17 journalism educators, found that of 29 modules listed as being taught by respondents, most were chiefly practice-based – though she adds that students may be taking theory courses in their degree not taught by the respondents (Greenberg 2007, 299).

Indeed there is some evidence of resistance to “theory” from UK journalism educators. In Greenberg’s survey, 12 of the 17 respondents talked about theory as harmful to journalism education, dubbing it “confusing, demoralising and based on ignorance or misconception of journalism realities” – though she notes that “theory” is understood very differently by practice-based journalism educators than it is by those based in an academic discipline (2007, 300).

Given the paucity of evidence (this study notwithstanding) of how news literacy is taught in journalism education in the UK, any conclusions drawn must be tentative.

However, for those practitioners who adopt the industry model of journalism training (Mensing), it is unlikely that they are teaching a critical approach to newsroom norms that a nuanced news literacy would demand.

Yet, it is also the case that there are those in journalism education who are more directly engaged with theory and presumably more willing to embrace an approach to news literacy that goes beyond reinforcing “quality” journalism. A quarter of respondents to Greenberg’s survey had a doctorate. More broadly, without further study, it is impossible to know how journalism educators think. As Rowe (2004, 50) argues, many media educators have a deep commitment to the study of the media for its own sake and resent the suggestion that they are merely in the business of skills transfer.

Methodology

The voice of UK journalism educators is largely missing from the literature on news literacy. The researchers, therefore, sought a methodology that would allow us to map news literacy teaching within UK journalism departments as widely as possible, while also generating richer, qualitative data from a smaller sample of participants, offering detailed insight into their (albeit subjective) perspectives and experiences. The project was therefore conducted in two stages. Stage one was an online survey conducted in March–April 2019. Stage two was a series of semi-structured interviews with a sample of survey respondents, conducted in April–May 2019. The combination of these two methods allowed the researchers to reach the widest possible cohort of potential participants and give every UK journalism department the opportunity to participate, while

allowing for a manageably small sample at the interview stage. The broad invitation to participate at stage one also helped ensure the anonymity of interviewees drawn from within that sample.

This paper will consider both but will focus primarily on data gathered at stage two. Our key research questions were:

- (1) To what extent is news literacy being taught on undergraduate journalism programmes in the UK?
- (2) How do journalism academics perceive the role of news literacy teaching within their courses?
- (3) How much appetite is there within the journalism academy to increase the amount of news literacy that is taught and, to the extent that there is appetite, what resources would be helpful in making this happen?
- (4) How do journalism educators perceive the levels of news literacy among their incoming students; what if anything, do they identify as the primary problems and what are their suggested solutions?

For the purposes of this study, the authors adopted as a starting point the Stony Brook definition of news literacy, namely the possession of the necessary “critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of information, whether it comes via print, television or the internet” (Center for News Literacy 2020). In our survey, we expanded this to include: an understanding of dis- and misinformation; the ability to recognise features such as framing and bias within news stories; the ability to differentiate between types of information such as opinion, advertising and factual news; the ability to evaluate sources used in news content; concepts such as filter bubbles and echo chambers, and issues related to the political economy of the news media including ownership, regulation and financial challenges.

Stage One

The survey was administered using the Qualtrics programme and distributed to prospective respondents via personalised links sent to their publicly available institutional email addresses. The inclusion criteria for the sample were heads of journalism departments and journalism course convenors at recognised HE institutions that were included in the 2018 (most recent) Guardian league table for UK undergraduate journalism degrees or similar programmes, including a strong element of journalism. These were selected as being the people most likely to have a broad overview of their courses.

Respondents were invited to complete the survey but also given the option of forwarding their personalised link to a departmental colleague who might have more appropriate knowledge of news literacy teaching at that institution. Qualtrics enabled the researchers to ensure that no more than one response was obtained from any institution.

The original email containing a link to the survey was sent to 55 BA journalism programme convenors on 20 March 2019. Four reminder emails were sent, the last on 17 April 2019.

The survey was kept intentionally brief, to maximise response rate and was pilot tested on a small convenience sample of colleagues before circulation.

Participants were first asked: Have you heard of the term news literacy? Those that had were asked to define news literacy as a free text response before being presented with a list of concepts that could be considered to fall under the term news literacy (for example, mis- and disinformation). They were asked to select which, if any, their course covered. Participants were asked if news literacy featured as a standalone subject on their programme(s), and if so, at what level. They were asked whether they would be interested in introducing more news literacy teaching; what resources (e.g., a website, discussion forum or e-newsletter) would be useful in doing so; and to list as a free text answer any external news literacy initiatives of which they were aware.

A total of 32 academic members of staff participated, although three who started the survey did not complete it. This left 29 valid responses from a sample size of 55, giving a response rate of 53%.

Survey data is presented here in anonymised form. It should be noted that the researchers' own institutions, where news literacy is taught at Level 4 (first-year undergraduate) as a standalone subject (although in differing levels of detail), do not feature in the survey data. A fuller discussion of the methodology, questions and findings of this survey stage appear elsewhere (Yeoman and Morris 2019), although key findings are explored below.

Stage Two

The interview stage was designed to generate richer, in-depth data from a smaller sample of lecturers. There is limited research that considers in detail the individual professional experiences and opinions of this cohort. As such, this data provides valuable insight into the albeit subjective perspectives of those at the "front line" of journalism education.

Interviewees were self-selecting from within the broader sample of survey respondents. On completing the survey, respondents were invited to submit their email addresses if they were willing to be contacted regarding a follow-up interview. Of 29 survey respondents, 16 submitted addresses. All were emailed between April and May 2019. Where no response was forthcoming, a minimum of two follow-up emails were sent. In total, 12 interviews were conducted, in person or by telephone. In two instances, both researchers were present. The other 10 interviews were conducted by a single researcher.

The interviews were intentionally semi-structured. A pre-agreed set of questions was used as a template by both researchers to ensure consistency of core content, while follow-up and supplementary questions were responsive to the comments and experiences of individual interviewees. Core interview questions were structured into the following areas: the nature and extent of news literacy teaching on respondents' courses; news literacy teaching resources; news literacy levels among incoming students; and the place of journalism lecturers in the broader societal debate about news and media literacy. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed. They lasted for a mean average of approximately 50 min.

Interview data was anonymised and subjected to thematic analysis by both researchers. Themes were generated inductively, based on the active reading of the data prior to coding, but with an awareness of the original research questions. Interview data was thus cohered into themes that "captured something important in relation to the overall

research question” (e.g., interest in expanding news literacy teaching) but also that “unified fragments of experiences and ideas” that were present within our respondents’ comments but were perhaps not so explicit in the research questions, as per the work of Nowell et al. (2017, 8). These emerging themes included the need for news literacy teaching in schools.

The researchers were aware of the interviewees’ survey responses at the time of interview, to facilitate relevant questioning within a semi-structured format and to give insight into the range of prior attitudes towards news literacy within our interview sample. However, no linkage has been made in our data between a respondent’s survey and interview answers, in order to preserve the anonymity of both sample groups. It is noteworthy that although the interview cohort was a convenience sample of those willing to participate, it included lecturers who had expressed a variety of attitudes towards news literacy in the survey, including, for example, both those who “definitely would” like to introduce it onto their courses as a standalone subject to those who said they would not. Some had indicated relatively extensive prior experience of news literacy in their survey responses, for example, by listing external providers, whereas others did not. Respondents came from a variety of course types, ranging from the highly practice-oriented to the entirely theoretical.

Findings

The Place of News Literacy Within Journalism Courses and Wider HE

A key survey finding was that many of the concepts identified above as constituent parts of news literacy education are widely taught in UK journalism courses. All respondents reported teaching at least some of the concepts listed in the survey. The most popular, “so-called fake news, mis- and disinformation,” was selected by 27 of the 29 respondents. Our survey found that verification and sourcing; framing and bias are also widely taught (see appendix 1; Yeoman and Morris 2019).

However, such concepts are rarely grouped together or articulated as “news literacy” within journalism programmes. Only two survey respondents said that they teach news literacy as a standalone subject. Indeed, while respondents reported awareness of “news literacy” (only one reported that they had not heard of it), participants’ own definitions of the term spoke to the notion, discussed above, that it remains a contested and malleable term. These definitions varied from the instrumentalist – citing practical skills such as fact-checking – to a more critical approach such as “the ability to read and consume news in a critically effective way” (Yeoman and Morris 2019). Almost nowhere outside of the researchers’ own institutions is news literacy teaching explicitly labelled as such. At LJMU, news literacy is taught as a series of 10 one-hour workshops within a Level 4, semester one module called Studying as Journalists. At Goldsmiths, news literacy workshops are embedded in the Level 4 module Introduction to Multimedia Journalism.

These varied definitions suggest a possible reason for the disparity between the presence of news literacy teaching on journalism courses and its apparent absence from the pedagogical lexicon of the field. Within journalism HE, our results indicate, there is no agreed definition of what news literacy is. Our interview data suggest a further possible

reason for this disparity: a tension between those who feel that explicit news literacy training is necessary, and those who see it as implicit within and inherent to a journalism curriculum. On one side of the debate, some respondents felt that the explicit promotion of news literacy skills is a key part of ensuring that students engage with those skills as members of society as well as in their role as trainee journalists. One interviewee said: "We need to be producing very news literate graduates who would be hopefully excellent journalists as a result - and consumers of news, and citizens." This respondent planned to argue for the use of "news literacy" as a term in module descriptors and learning outcomes as part of their institution's programme review, commenting more generally: "I think labels do help and we have talked about student engagement." Another reflected that participation in this project had "sold" them on the need to tell students when they were being taught news literacy skills. A third reflected: "It is interesting to think about teaching it as opposed to 'they'll pick it up by osmosis'." Such remarks reflect a perspective that there might be merit in articulating the presence of news literacy teaching on a syllabus, to highlight to students the importance of such education to them as both trainee journalists and citizens. Our survey data would indicate some interest in this idea; when asked whether they had any appetite for introducing standalone news literacy teaching, 19 of 29 respondents answered in the affirmative.

More common in the interview data, however, was ambivalence or even opposition to news literacy, at least as an explicitly defined syllabus of concepts, within a journalism degree. Here the sense was that news literacy is automatically infused throughout such a course, and that ghettoising such concepts was both unnecessary and potentially harmful, in that trainee journalists should be "news literate" in everything they do. In the words of one interviewee: "I think that you could see the whole of the degree as a news literacy degree ... Almost organically ideas of news literacy arise." Another stated: "Everything we do is basically news literacy," going on to say: "I think we, who teach journalism, should probably be the last people to introduce news literacy modules on our courses." Yet the same respondent was emphatic about the importance of news literacy concepts to their programme: "I think news literacy, can and should be embedded into our teaching more and evaluated through or sort of its place should be defined and could be defined better through the learning objectives." In this view, news literacy should be articulated in the degree's pedagogical aims – made part of the formal curriculum rather than the hidden and informal curricula that educators impart alongside it – but not placed in the silo of one individual module.

The tension in our interview data about whether news literacy teaching should be a discrete programme of work or diffused throughout a degree programme echoes the debate, discussed above, about the place of media or critical digital literacy as either subject-specific or cross-curricular within schools (Polizzi 2020, 10). It also speaks to the debates within journalism education as to whether degree programmes should offer vocational training delivered along industry lines or seek to challenge these norms, incorporating cultural theories of news production (Rowe 2004, Polizzi 2020).

The researchers, while recognising the diversity of degree courses and student cohorts, would suggest that there is merit in colleagues, at least considering whether their undergraduates would benefit from having the importance of being news literate – as a citizen as well as a journalist – articulated. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss

approaches to news literacy teaching – implicit and explicit – in a wider forum such as the Association of Journalism Educators’ conference.

News Literacy Among Incoming Students

Journalism lecturers are concerned, judging by a recurrent theme in the interview data, about what they perceive as declining levels of news literacy among incoming students. Our interview respondents indicated two inter-linked challenges regarding recent intakes. The first is a perceived lack of consumption of news via mainstream platforms. Not all journalism students want to be news reporters, but all our respondents teach on general journalism programmes (as opposed to specialist sports or fashion courses, for example), of which news forms a central part. One interviewee, who felt that in general, the “quality of candidates is getting better and better” on their course, nevertheless noted: “The challenge ... is how to get them to consume more [news].” Another joked about having gone through “the stages of grief” in accepting students’ lack of interest, remarking: “It is kind of shocking to come from industry, join a journalism programme and find out the students don’t really know what news is.” It should be remembered that such assessments of student knowledge are personal opinions, and that lecturers’ own current or former immersion in the news industry might affect what is expected of incoming undergraduates.

Yet one interviewee made the illuminating contrast between their sports journalism students, who were avid consumers of sports media, and some journalism undergraduates who have “not thought that much about why they want to study journalism, so they arrive and they don’t know that much about news.” This theme – that some incoming students do not actually want to be journalists and many do not want to be news journalists – perhaps makes a perceived lack of news literacy less surprising. Arguably, however, it strengthens the case for these undergraduates to be taught the basics of news literacy in a way that would make them critically aware “lay consumers” of journalism even if they never deploy such skills in a professional capacity.

The second and most frequently cited theme in this section of the data was the increased blurring in students’ minds between news and opinion, and the need to spend time unpicking the two in their work. One interviewee said:

We spend a lot of time saying: ‘I’m not interested in your opinions ... I want to know the facts.’ ... Then we can build back up to opinion writing ... But we have to teach them the division first, how to emphasise facts.

Interviewees suggested that teenage media consumption habits, driven by smartphones and social media, encourages these blurred distinctions. This again is the opinion of individual respondents but is supported by research from Ofcom (2019b), Galan et al. (2019) and others, as outlined in the literature review, about the news habits of young people in general.

Incoming students do not differentiate between news and opinion, interviewees believe, having grown up on a diet of blogs, digital native sites and social media posts where the two are interchangeable. They also, one respondent said, sometimes fail to differentiate between news publishers and other content providers because: “They don’t think about who’s creating the published story they just think about ‘Oh I saw it

on my phone.’” One lecturer said their students have a “very vague notion of what they think journalism is and I think it’s generally based around a wider sense of content creation.” Another said:

I think they struggle to see the difference between comment and news stories. And especially I think in the online era, because websites all look the same, on your phone, they all look the same and articles look the same, there’s no signposting that says: ‘This is someone’s opinion now.’

One reflected that this diet of content consumed on smartphones has led to the “biggest misconception about what journalism is,” i.e., that news should be driven by opinion rather than facts. Another said:

That’s why they want to be journalists, it’s not about the news, they want a voice. They want to come and give people their opinions on things. I do think that’s partly to do just with their age. I do think, also, it is our era of social media and the platforms that they’ve grown up on. They’re very used to giving an opinion at least.

For another, the acceptance of subjectivity and opinion-driven writing in content that is labelled news has even normalised the notion of fabricating evidence among some prospective students. They said:

They bring you their portfolio from college, and it includes what they call “newspaper articles” which is just littered with the I’ pronoun and I’ll read through it and I’ll say ‘Who was this person who you interviewed?’ ‘Well actually ... I made that person up so that it was possible to get both sides.’ So right from the get go they’re faking news. So sometimes when students come to us, we have to teach them how to unfake news.

There is a debate within journalism ethics about the place of opinion within news reporting in the digital age, and about whether transparency of viewpoint has superseded objectivity or independence as an imperative (e.g., Ward 2018, 45). The researchers believe that, whatever the arguments in favour of opinion-driven journalism, it is important that trainee reporters can spot the difference between verified fact and assertion. New BBC social guidelines issued to staff indicate that at least some prospective employers expect them to be able to do so (BBC 2021). We would further argue that if our respondents’ perceptions are correct that students are less able to make this distinction than previously, this is of potential concern in terms of their ability to critically consume journalism as citizens, as well as to produce it.

News Literacy Education in Schools

Although divided on the place of teaching labelled as news literacy within a journalism degree, respondents were unanimous in their belief that such teaching should be widely available to schoolchildren. The appropriate time to address any shortcomings in their incoming students’ understanding of journalism and news is, they believe, long before they reach university. Journalism students are a tiny, self-selecting minority of young people. It is clear from our data that educators feel that a critical understanding of journalism’s role in a democratic society, and the skills to differentiate quality news content from other material, are important dimensions of a school education that should be consistently available to all children.

One typical response was: “News literacy should be taught to students as young as possible – it is vital to understand these issues.” One interviewee went as far as to say: “The bedrock of western democracies is being challenged severely by a lack of news literacy”. There was a common view that a basic introduction to such concepts could usefully begin at primary school, with more advanced teaching at around age 12 or 13, as independent use of online resources and social media becomes more widespread. As one interviewee put it: “I think it’s a bit like sex education. I think it should start in primary school and then carry through the life cycle of the education.” Another said:

I think you can’t start too young – depending on where you are pitching it. It is really important for children from a young age to be engaging with news. If all children in schools are getting relationship education or trying a musical instrument, ideally they should be learning about this. It should be core.

The data suggest that our interviewees do not have the same ambivalence about explicitly defining news literacy within school teaching as they have regarding their own courses. This could reflect a perception of “news literacy” as relating to citizen-level teaching of the relevant concepts; the kind of understanding needed for critical engagement with journalism from the perspective of the engaged consumer. As per above, there are competing perceptions about whether journalism educators have a role in this kind of civic education, as opposed to a purer vocational function as providers of specialist professional training. Our data suggest that at least some journalism undergraduates might benefit from the “citizen level” teaching as well as anything more specialist. However, it might be worth exploring whether what we have thus far defined as news literacy should be redefined and distinguished in specialist terms for the purposes of journalism programmes.

The Role of Journalism Educators and the News Literacy Debate

There was a shared feeling that HE journalism educators have a role to play in helping to develop a more comprehensive schools-level approach to news literacy. One interviewee said it would be a “great thing” if “the knowledge of journalism educators could be used to inform and better organise the teaching of news literacy in schools and colleges.” A few are already doing this in an individual capacity. One respondent, who delivers news literacy workshops to local schoolchildren, said they were spurred by the 2016 Brexit vote and a sense of responsibility to impart some of their knowledge. They said: “I came to the idea ... after the EU referendum. I thought okay, what should we do about this?”

Another spoke of the gap between schools and universities in a broader sense, saying:

I still think there is a real disconnect there. Why would we not want to be part of that debate in terms of what is going on in schools? And we could maybe build some bridges and be involved in that conversation around the subject of news literacy.

The sense of the untapped knowledge was echoed by another interviewee, who said: “If it was a history syllabus, we would ask historians to contribute to it, wouldn’t we. If it is about journalism, I think we should probably get journalist [educators] to do it.” Several stressed the potential in “linking up” schools and universities. “Teachers in school are great, but they’ve no industry experience,” said one, echoing a view expressed by fellow respondents that a practical understanding of industry realities would be a useful dimension to any more widespread news literacy education package.

There was little awareness among respondents of the News Literacy Network (National Literacy Trust 2020) or its member initiatives, which include projects run by news organisations including The Times, The Guardian and the Economist, as well as the BBC's Real News strand. Only five survey respondents had heard of any external initiatives. The researchers are themselves members of the NLN and sit on an Ofcom media literacy evaluation working group but have no role in shaping or evaluating any educational initiatives.

No respondent expressed blanket opposition to the principle of schools utilising resources developed by news industry players, such as The Times' News Literacy Programme (The Times and Sunday Times News Literacy Project 2020) or funded by tech companies like Google. Indeed, some argued that their input into curricula was beneficial and important. One interviewee said that it was "very important that we do have industry as part of the development of curriculum." Another agreed, saying that they would be happier seeing journalists from major news platforms teach news literacy than teachers, explaining:

I don't have a problem with journalists being involved in producing that kind of content. Those [The Economist, The Times and The Guardian] are great brand names and I think it's not a terrible thing to get those in front of students at a young age as well.

Those with reservations spoke of concerns about the private sector entering classrooms. One said:

I suppose my view in other areas of society is that private companies shouldn't be involved in things like education or health care or anything which is sort of public good because there are always inherent risks that the profit motive will either consciously or unconsciously mean they don't necessarily do what is in the best interests of the greater good.

Another said:

When it is a company that can be demonstrably proven to be to have done socially and politically damaging things, the Mail, News International, even Google and Facebook ... I think we'd be approaching every decision with a healthy dose of scepticism.

There was, however, pragmatism, and an awareness of the limited school budgets. One interviewee said: "I've done a little bit with schools myself, but it's really hard for us to carve out the time to do it? You've got these massive budgets [in companies such as Google and Facebook]." Another added: "If it is properly checked, and deemed pedagogically and educationally valid, then yes of course, why not." This final comment taps into a recurrent theme: the importance of quality control, and of critical understanding by teachers of the likely parameters and motivations behind such resources. Here, our respondents echoed reflections by media education theorist David Buckingham, who has called for scepticism about offers of educational resources from media companies and pointed out that in the USA, the issue of working with commercial companies has caused a split between two major media education associations (Buckingham 2019). "I'm inclined to be pragmatic," he wrote, "but this means that we need to evaluate individual instances very carefully."

Our interviewees offered practical suggestions for vetting or quality control on news literacy resources being offered to schools, including a kitemark, a governing body and a consortium that could develop and compile resources. Independent oversight should be carried out, respondents suggested, by "NGOs or think tanks, experts" or government

and regulators. The researchers would raise the possibility that journalism lecturers themselves could usefully offer some independent evaluation of resources that might be of benefit to non-specialist teachers, thus helping to bridge the gap that some respondents perceived between school and university educators.

There was little awareness of any news literacy or related teaching or research being done by other departments within the researchers' own universities. It is beyond the scope of this study to assess the extent to which such work is happening, but what can be said is that our respondents are not working with colleagues elsewhere in their universities to offer basic news literacy skills – defined as such or otherwise – to students on other courses. This is despite a shared view that, in the words of one respondent: "These aren't just ... skills that should be left only to media and journalism students. All students need this now, especially given the universal access they have to the world through social media." Collaborations both within universities and beyond are, the researchers feel, one way in which journalism educators might usefully harness both their expertise and their belief in the importance of news literacy to society at large. This is discussed further below.

Discussion and Recommendations

Our findings show that journalism educators view critical news literacy skills as an educational imperative far beyond the confines of HE journalism departments; a set of competencies that should be available to all and dealt with before students reach their courses. Some felt that their voices could be a valuable addition to the national debate around news literacy. As one interviewee said: "There should always be more of an interface between what is going on in schools and universities." Yet none of our respondents had any sustained involvement with news literacy initiatives operating outside their universities or indeed with any institutional news or media literacy skills offer outside of their own journalism departments. In terms of the wider debate, the voices of journalism educators are not in the main being heard, despite the fact that their professional careers often combine the experience of both education and the practical realities of news production, and their insight into emerging trends and issues among the generation of journalists and communications professionals currently in training.

The researchers are acutely aware of the competing demands on lecturers' time, and of the practical constraints that militate against inter-departmental teaching. However, we recommend that journalism lecturers should explore the potential for developing some teaching resources in this area. These could be delivered as part of foundation courses at their institutions; within study skills and similar modules on a wide range of undergraduate courses across universities; or as part of a collaboration with institutional libraries. There is an element of enlightened self-interest here. News literacy pioneer Howard Schneider has argued that by offering news literacy skills training on a wide basis, journalism departments could move from the periphery to the heart of their institutions (Fleming 2014, 159). By providing short courses, seminars or online resources that are applicable to students of other disciplines, they could go from being providers of professional journalism training to having an essential role in equipping the wider student body to deal with the communications revolution. We argue that in an era of acute competition for students and pressure to generate income and "added value," news literacy education offers an opportunity to journalism departments.

Whether through standalone sessions to be offered as part of other degree programmes, resources for distribution through library and support services or external engagement such as teacher training and schools workshops, news literacy is a path via which journalism departments can embed themselves in their university's teaching and learning strategies; civic outreach and even recruitment.

The consensus among interviewees was that school is the preferred place for news and media literacy to be addressed in the first instance. This speaks to the idea that interviewees saw news literacy as a citizen term, a set of competencies that should be available to all and dealt with before students reach their courses. The researchers do not disagree, although a full exploration of the limits of current news literacy education in schools, and the debate about its desirable place within the curriculum either as a discrete subject or as diffuse competencies to be taught on a cross-subject basis, is beyond the scope of this article (and is the subject of further ongoing research by ourselves and others). In the meantime, given our respondents' apparent belief in the importance of news literacy education for all children; their own expertise – often combining industry experience with academic and pedagogical training – and the pragmatic need for universities to engage in outreach work to attract applicants, lecturers could consider how they might partner with local schools. Options could include offering professional development seminars to teachers covering news literacy concepts, working with schools to evaluate and select appropriate external resources, or delivery of workshops on news literacy concepts such as verification and misinformation.

The researchers believe that journalism educators have a role to play in the development of news literacy education across schools, universities and beyond. This might be as individuals or via an umbrella body such as the AJE. They should feature more prominently in quality assurance and evaluation of initiatives by other actors. This is all the more critical given the narrow scope of many news literacy initiatives run by news platforms or third sector organisations, with their focus on the nebulous term “fake news” and avoidance of any critical approach to problems with the UK news market.

What Craft, Ashley, and Maksl (2017) describe as a key plank of news literacy – that of fostering a sceptical disposition and critical attitude towards news itself – is embedded in journalism programmes and could usefully be embedded in news literacy education for schools. By sharing their expertise, they could help bring news literacy educational provision in schools closer to the more comprehensive and critical visions of it espoused by writers such as Mihailidis (2012; Craft, Ashley, and Maksl (2017)) who sees news literacy as a method for enhancing civic engagement, and also realign it with contemporary media literacy which seeks to teach the public about underlying power structures within the media (Hobbs and Jensen (2009); Buckingham (2003); Craft, Ashley, and Maksl (2017)). Beckett, in his book, *Supermedia, Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World*, calls for the power relationship between journalists and the public to be transformed. This new relationship of greater transparency between journalists and the public would see journalists connect with the world beyond the newsroom, sharing their processes with the public. By doing this, he argues, the public gains the resources to adopt a critical engagement with journalism, and political education (Beckett 2008). Engaging journalism educators in the news literacy movement is a step towards this goal.

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ORCID

Kate Morris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7223-6667>

Frances Yeoman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5024-9571>

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