

EDUCATION

Teaching news literacy in the age of fake news

Svetlana Shkolnikova Staff Writer, @svetashko

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About a dozen undergraduates gathered on a recent Tuesday in a second floor classroom of the Center for Academic Success at Kean University to talk about the news.

The discussion touched on the French presidential election, President Trump's budget proposal, the possible federal prosecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and finally, conservative pundit Ann Coulter's planned speech at the University of California, Berkeley — a topic professor Pat Winters Lauro used to segue into a lesson on the First Amendment.

“What's happening today in our culture is people are creating these silos of thought and they only listen to what they agree with,” she told students. “You want to have a variety of sources.”

Lauro, the director of journalism in Kean's School of Communication, Media & Journalism, has been dispensing this advice since January, when she resurrected a news literacy class she created five years ago to combat the rise of misinformation online.

She taught the course twice to graduate students before setting it aside, feeling burned out by a heavy course load.

Then, last fall, the presidential campaign brought “fake news” — intentionally false stories masqueraded as factual news reports — to the forefront and Lauro found herself talking about the politicization of news more and more.

“For the first time ever, students were interested and professors were interested and it came up again,” she said.

Two in three adults, or 63 percent, say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events, according to a 2016 Pew Research Center

survey. Twenty-three percent say they have shared a made-up news story, 14 percent of them knowingly.

“It’s created an incredible amount of frustration in the minds of the public,” George White, executive director of the New Jersey Press Association, said. “I think an unfortunate outcome is the impact it’s had on the perceived credibility of media overall and the great deal of skepticism that the public today has about what’s being served up to them as news.”

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Lauro is not alone in teaching the subject. William Paterson University in Wayne offers a similar class, Seton Hall University in South Orange hopes to revive a class on news literacy next year and a center at Stony Brook University on Long Island in New York is devoted to the entire subject.

At William Paterson University, Joann Lee teaches undergraduate students of all majors how to be smarter consumers of information.

She began her news literacy class six years ago after attending a session on the subject at the Stony Brook center and tweaks it with every semester to reflect the growing influence of social media.

“I can’t imagine not having a class like this at this point in time,” Lee said. “Where does a consumer go to share feedback, to share questions, to question the whole range of social media and information if not by examination in a classroom?”

Lee did not teach the class this semester but will do so in the fall, when she plans to talk about “post-truth” and how the definition and usage of the term “fake news” is evolving.

“There are real issues here which are interesting from the perspective of a consumer and the journalism industry itself and that’s why it’s a great time to teach news literacy,” she said.

Kean University’s news literacy class has changed since Lauro last taught it. This semester heavily focused on analyzing the headlines emerging from Washington, deconstructing articles, tracing stated facts to their sources, comparing news outlets and examining journalism’s code of ethics.

Mike Roche, a junior communication studies major, said he signed up for the elective after becoming overwhelmed with a constant barrage of articles on social media.

"It's been difficult lately to sort out what's real and what's not in the news, it's becoming sort of a mess out there so I just wanted to get some sense of how to do it properly," he said.

Kenny Gutierrez, a junior business management major, said he started Lauro's class with an indifferent attitude, thinking the class would be an easy A that happened to fit into his schedule.

But he was hooked by the end of the first lesson.

"We started talking about fake news and after that I saw all these biases," he said. "[Lauro] helped me get an appreciation for finding actual information instead of just word-of-mouth things."

Lauro places great importance in her work, likening it to a civics class that teaches students to be better, more informed citizens.

"I think it's like the survival of democracy," she said. "I really feel that if you don't get information that is honest and objective, you can't make a good decision."

It's a view shared by the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University, a division within the university's journalism school dedicated to teaching students how to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports and sources.

The center launched in 2007 – when “fake news” described satirical programs like “The Daily Show,” said Assistant Director Jonathan Anzalone – and has since partnered with four local middle and high schools and 26 colleges and universities worldwide, including Kean and William Paterson universities.

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KELLY: Fake news is one problem. But what about fake journalists?

JOURNALISM: Lester Holt talks state of journalism at Montclair State

Public interest in the center's work spiked in the aftermath of the election, said Anzalone, driven in large part by a proliferation of fake news he believes highlighted the need for fact-checking.

“There’s been a realization among some that finding the truth is a worthwhile endeavor,” he said. “There’s no point in training the next generation of great journalists if we don’t also train news consumers to deal with the current challenges of finding the best information.”

Those challenges extend beyond fake news, into a “swamp of information” infested with sponsored content, propaganda and social media algorithms that favor people’s impulses to seek out information confirming their beliefs, said Anzalone.

Learning to navigate the swamp should start early, ideally in the preteens, he said, but lessons on evaluating sources and looking for transparency and fairness in news coverage can benefit all ages.

Jon Radwan, chair of the communications program at Seton Hall University’s College of Communication and the Arts, also believes the time is ripe for such education.

The college offered a news literacy class under the guidance of its then-writer-in-residence, journalist Anthony DePalma, for several years but had to pull it recently due to a lack of funding. Radwan said he is hoping for a spring 2018 comeback.

“Being a smart news consumer is something every citizen needs, especially in the 21st century newscape where there’s more information and disinformation flying around than ever before,” he said. “In my ideal world, it would be a requirement for every student in the university.”

Lauro’s students say her class has helped them comb through an avalanche of online news and information and sort fact from fiction.

“I find myself looking at things a little more critically and rushing through articles less than I used to,” said Roche. “Now I find myself reading more carefully and being more mindful that you can’t always believe what you read.”

Email: shkolnikova@northjersey.com