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In an Era of Fake News, Teaching Students to Parse Fact From Fiction

By JAMES BARRON MARCH 20, 2017

The sixth graders took their seats in a classroom with a “news literacy word wall” that featured, in large letters, terms like “validity,” “accurate” and “reliable.” The teacher, Marisol Solano, said that the question for the day boiled down to this: “How do we know what’s news or not?”

Then she played a four-minute video of a man jumping from an airplane — without a parachute, the video said. As the class broke into discussion groups, Ms. Solano told the students to concentrate on other questions, about the video: “Would I share this? Would that be responsible of me as a news consumer?”

Fake news worked its way into the public consciousness during the presidential campaign last year and remains a hot topic, especially at Intermediate School 303 in Coney Island, Brooklyn, where teachers like Ms. Solano are on the offensive. Their lesson plans are aimed at steeping students in news literacy, which involves determining whether an article or a video is real — and if it is real, whether it is, for example, a news story or an advertisement made to look like a news report.

The teachers see an urgency to news literacy because, on the internet, misinformation can be mistaken for news. Is a tweet ripped from the headlines, or fabricated?

And then there is “fake news.”

“We started news literacy even before people started talking about fake news,” said the principal, Carmen Amador. “But something we always asked students to do, think critically, now has new importance.”

Upstairs, a seventh-grade class was grappling with whether an article headlined “Fraudulent Clinton Votes Discovered by the ‘Tens of Thousands’” was trustworthy.

The seventh graders are more practiced at news literacy, and it showed. One student evaluated the sourcing: “They got it from a Trump supporter,” he said. A classmate noted that the article said the website had not independently confirmed the story. The students were skeptical.

“You have to be selective about what you take in and accept as truth,” the teacher, Rema Kaddah, told them. “Don’t accept somebody else’s truth. You’re living in a different world than we grew up in. You need to think about how to arm yourself to fact-check this world.”

Indeed, this is a confusing time to be teaching the difference between fake news and real news, what with President Trump blasting television networks and The New York Times as the “fake news media.” And social media has contributed to the spread of stories that have no basis in fact, with troubling consequences.

In December, a 28-year-old man drove to Washington to “self-investigate” a conspiracy theory that had spread online about child sex trafficking at a pizza restaurant. The man, Edgar Maddison Welch, fired an assault rifle a couple of times once he arrived. No one was injured. Last week lawyers said that he had reached a plea deal on weapons charges.

I.S. 303’s involvement with news literacy began when Ms. Amador attended a conference a few years ago held by the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University, which sees its mission as instructing the news consumers of the future.

The center has been doing that since before Facebook and Twitter reshaped the media landscape and made it easier than ever to spread fake news. A concern is that teenagers who have never known anything but a smartphone as a source for news need to learn to separate fiction from fact as they work their way around the web.

“People call me and say, ‘Wow, isn’t it great that you came up with this course to fight fake news?’” said Howard Schneider, the dean of the Stony Brook School of Journalism and a former editor of the Long Island newspaper Newsday. “It’s like those actors who get discovered overnight when they’ve been working for 10 years. We’ve been fighting fake news since 2007.”

But the fight is not just about fake news. “If you define fake news as news that’s totally fabricated,” he said, “that’s only a small part of a much bigger problem, which is this tsunami of information and misinformation, half-truths, advertising masquerading as news and opinion appearing as if it’s fact-based. That’s the problem, the information stew we’re dealing with.”

“Introducing this at the university level is way, way too late,” he said.

The ideal time is middle school, he said, when students are internet-savvy but not yet immersed in social media. And their worldviews and political orientations are not fixed as firmly as they will be later on.

The video that Ms. Solano played for her class appeared to show a parachutist jumping from a single-engine plane, landing on a trampoline and surviving. The video looked like a news report. It went viral when it was released in 2014.

News literacy teaches students to ask, among other things, whether a news article or a video is from a legitimate news organization.

That question figured in the way Ms. Solano’s students analyzed the video. A couple of students noticed that the video came not from a major television network but from something identified as Sky Newz, which they realized was not a real news outlet.

Most said they would share the video. “They’re so used to YouTubing and being YouTubers,” Ms. Solano said after class. “They saw this and they found it to be exciting, and they didn’t question, ‘Is this real?’”

But Charline Giambrone, 12, was among a handful of students who did question it. “There wasn’t one name” in the video, she said. “Someone could just be jumping through a roof and landing on a trampoline.”

Charline was right. The video was a clever promotion for a trampoline park in Louisiana. The jump was not real.

Ms. Solano did not mention something that blurs the distinction between real and made-up even more: In 2016, two years after the Louisiana video, the skydiver Luke Aikins jumped from an altitude of 25,000 feet. He landed on a trampoline — outdoors — without a parachute.

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