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Editorial: Local educators join national effort to teach critical news literacy skills

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In an age where “information” is available at dizzying speeds and in seemingly endless quantities, it is essential to teach consumers the skills they need to discern what is fair, accurate and reliable.

Thankfully, local educators are joining their colleagues across the country in providing students of all ages the tools they need to help discern between fact and opinion, rumor and substantiated details.

In March, 35 educators from the region participated in the first of a series of webinars exploring critical inquiry in the internet era sponsored by the Collaborative for Educational Services in Northampton. The agency also is developing a workshop for educators examining critical literacy and news consumption.

“I think it’s been a critical thing for a long time,” though it has become more urgent with the proliferation of social media, says William Diehl, the collaborative’s executive director. “Social media doesn’t have the kind of intermediate review process that most newspapers use, or journals use, or textbooks use.”

John Crescitelli, a 27-year veteran teacher who has taught internet research skills and literacy for the last seven years at John F. Kennedy Middle School in Northampton, says, “The kids come in and they believe anything. It’s so hard, and it’s only getting harder and harder and harder every single day.”

To help guide educators, Crescitelli and other teachers worked with the Collaborative for Educational Services to develop a tool that allows them to determine how critically students conduct research. The exercise involves students reporting on sources they find to support arguments on either side of the “debate”

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over where people really landed on the moon.

The challenges are nationwide. The Stanford History Education Group — a teacher preparation program — reported last November the results of an 18-month study of 7,804 middle school, high school and college students in 12 states to gauge their “ability to judge the credibility of information that floods young people’s smartphones, tablets, and computers.”

The study concluded, “Overall, young people’s ability to reason about the information on the internet can be summed up in one word: bleak. Our ‘digital natives’ may be able to flit between Facebook and Twitter while simultaneously uploading a selfie to Instagram and texting a friend. But when it comes to evaluating information that flows through social media channels, they are easily duped.”



Sam Wineburg, a professor of education and history at Stanford and the study’s lead author, told New England Public Radio in November that “the only way that we can deal with these kinds of issues are through educational programs and recognizing that the kinds of things that we worry about — the ability to determine what is reliable or not reliable — that is the new basic skill in our society.”

Brian Chamberlin dedicates each Sept. 11 to teaching very specific lessons in news literacy to sixth-grade students at the William E. Norris School in Southampton. Last week, for the 16th year, Chamberlin made sure his students had a full understanding of the terrorist attacks. He started the class by asking the students what they thought they knew about the events of Sept. 11, 2001. One believed a bomb had exploded at the World Trade Center; another said the buildings “fell” down; and others knew planes had crashed into them, but did not know why or were unaware of al-Qaida, the terrorist group behind the attacks.

Chamberlin said it is important to set the record straight for students because 9/11 is such an important event for Americans that should never be forgotten.

The emphasis on training more perceptive news consumers also extends to colleges. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Steve Fox, a senior lecturer in the journalism department, has taught a news literacy course since 2014. It recently was opened to all students.

“I think making this generation of college students more literate as far as it comes to news will help us further on down the line,” Fox says. “I’d hopefully we’re creating

a generation of voters that will be a lot more critical of information and of claims and assertions.”

That’s critical for all of us involved in this essential function of democracy, whether we are reporting or consuming the news.

Among the online resources are the News Literacy Project (www.thenewsliteracyproject.org/) and the American Press Institute news literacy curriculum for educators (www.americanpressinstitute.org/youth-news-literacy/resources/news-literacy-curriculum/).
