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Mapping the HE news literacy landscape in the UK

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Abstract

'News literacy' is a relatively well-established term in some parts of the world, notably the USA. It has risen to prominence in the UK more recently with debates at government level around a need for digital literacy education as a response to concerns around online mis- and dis-information. One voice largely absent from this debate is that of journalism educators. With this in mind, the authors set out to map news literacy teaching within HE journalism courses in the UK. Primary research was conducted between September 2018 and May 2019 using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This paper will include details of our findings and reflections on the development of an educators' network and/ or suite of resources.

Introduction

News literacy, despite being a contested term, has made the UK headlines in recent months.

Last year's report into disinformation and 'fake news' from the Department for Digital, Culture Media and Sport Committee called for digital literacy to be the fourth pillar of education, alongside reading, writing and maths, while the Cairncross Report of February 2019 called on the government to develop a media literacy strategy.

In this context, and amid a febrile atmosphere generated by fallout from the 2016 US election and Brexit referendum, a range of organisations - news industry players, charities and educational bodies - have established news literacy initiatives of differing scale and with divergent priorities.

Attempts are being made to cohere and map what is a fragmented news literacy landscape.

A number of these organisations, including the Guardian Foundation, BBC, Economist, National Literacy Trust and Association of Citizenship Teachers, formed the News Literacy Network in the Summer of 2018 and Ofcom, the national broadcast regulator, has identified a need to map educational initiatives as part of its remit to promote digital literacy.

This activity is focused almost exclusively on school-age children. However, it is in this context that university journalism departments are charged with educating the UK's next generation of journalists.

These are young people with the same basic need as all young (and indeed older) media consumers for education in the basics of digital and news literacy. They are young people of a generation that sees the internet as its chief source of news (Ofcom, 2019, p. 15) yet lack the ability to critically evaluate online information (Stanford History Group, 2016, p. 4) that watches on average only two minutes of television news a day (Ofcom, 2019, p. 25) and that downloads news apps but then largely ignores them in favour of social media (Flamingo for Reuters Institute, 2019, p. 28). Yet these particular young people, as student journalists, also have a specialist imperative to understand concepts such as fact-checking; verification; mis- and disinformation; sourcing; bias and filter bubbles and the industrial socio-economic context in which such practices of news production occur.

In the USA, where the debate - and the academic literature - around news literacy is more developed than in the UK, the teaching of news literacy at HE level has been the focus of significant study.

Journalism educators on that side of the Atlantic have the advantage of open-access resources that are more suitable for university-level news literacy teaching than almost anything that is currently on offer in the UK. American resources include the Stony Brook Center for News Literacy's digital resource center, and The Sift, a weekly email from the News Literacy Project , as well as the support of subject-specific membership organisations such as the National Association of Media Literacy Educators (NAMLE).

The authors, who both teach news literacy at their respective UK universities, set out in this study to establish who is doing likewise in this country. By surveying the relevant heads of department, course convenors and interested researchers at a wide range of higher education institutions, we have attempted to map the range of news literacy education the UK's journalism students are getting. This work is intended to complement ongoing work by the authors and others to interrogate news literacy initiatives at schools level. Our second research objective was to assess the viability of a network of HE news literacy educators in the UK, echoing the DCMS committee's suggestion that there is pedagogical advantage to be drawn from working together in this area. Our findings suggest that there is appetite among journalism academics for some form of resource to support news literacy teaching.

News Literacy – literature review

The term news literacy has origins in the academy and in journalism itself.

The standalone body of literature on news literacy is relatively young and it has sprung both from the more established theoretical traditions of media literacy as well as from the less academically-minded priorities and initiatives driven by the news industry and journalists themselves.

Before examining its development as an academic discipline, its parallel growth as a method of teaching – often led by journalism educators or news providers – will be scrutinised.

This approach advocates or delivers what might be described as a pragmatic or skills-based approach to news literacy, with a focus on evaluating news outputs and differentiating 'legitimate' journalism from other forms of information.

It was pioneered by Howard Schneider, the executive director of the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University in the US and Alan Miller, the founder and CEO of the philanthropically funded News Literacy Project in the US.

The Stony Brook Center for News Literacy was founded in 2006 with multi-million dollar funding from the Knight Foundation and set out to deliver a 14-week news literacy programme to thousands of students majoring in journalism and a range of other subjects.

Its stated aim is 'to help students understand how journalism works and why information is such a powerful force for good and ill in modern societies', and the Center has built a network of US and overseas partner institutions that deliver part or all of its course (centerfornewsliteracy.org, accessed 15 May 2019).

The News Literacy Project, founded in 2008 by Miller, a former Los Angeles Times investigative reporter, has a similar aim. It is funded by a growing array of philanthropists and tech platforms including Apple, Facebook and the Knight Foundation, and in its mission statement declares that The News Literacy Project 'empowers educators to teach children the skills they need to become smart, active consumers of news and information and engaged, informed participants in our democracy' (newlit.org, accessed 15 May 2019). Part of their outreach work includes a weekly email to educators entitled 'The Sift', which suggests ways in which that week's news agenda could be deployed in the teaching of news literacy concepts.

Initiatives such as the NLP and Stony Brook have an emphasis on distinguishing what they perceive as legitimate, established news norms from all else, and use practising journalists in their resources.

The UK's newly-formed News Literacy Network, whose members are primarily educators and representatives of the news media, has adopted the definition used by Stony Brook University, that news literacy is: 'The ability to use critical thinking to judge the reliability and credibility of information, whether it comes via print, television or the internet' (centerfornewsliteracy.org, accessed 15 May 2019)

This, arguably, could encompass material far beyond the boundaries of what could be categorised as news. Indeed globally, the news literacy movement is primarily concerned with enabling citizens to distinguish news online from other content such as mis- and dis-information and propaganda alongside initiatives to rebuild public trust in news. Kenya's fact-checking platform Pesacheck and Cuny's News Integrity Initiative are prominent examples of such projects.

Given that news literacy as a method of teaching is relatively new, it is perhaps unsurprising that its research and theoretical underpinnings are also in their infancy. Indeed, as Fleming notes, the 'literature on news literacy specifically is limited given the label news literacy is relatively new' (Fleming, 2014 p.148). However, news literacy as an academic discipline is best understood as a subset of media literacy – though as Potter (2010, p. 675) explains, it is a term that itself 'means many different things to different people'

Inevitably, skills-based news literacy teaching programmes such as those described above have attracted interest from within the academy.

Maksl, Ashley and Craft (2015, p.29) explicitly link the motivations behind the news literacy movement with the financial crisis facing the news industry: 'For professional journalism, improving news literacy is partly a matter of economic survival, a way of sustaining demand for the type of content professional journalists provide, but also of fulfilling its role to help citizens be adequately informed to participate in democratic life.'

Meanwhile, the media literacy scholar Renee Hobbs (2010, p5) wrote of the 'problematic practice' of teaching about news 'exclusively from a journalist's point of view… telling war stories about the good ol' days does not inherently work to develop critical thinking and communication skills among students'.

She also warned that to 'focus on the ideals of journalism is mere propaganda if it is blind to the realities of contemporary journalism, where partisan politics and smear-fests are the surest way to build audiences'. Some programmes, Hobbs argues, should be termed news appreciation rather than news literacy, with their narrow and focused aim: to increase people's positive regard and appreciation for journalism (Hobbs, 2010, p.5).

Prominent critical media literacy scholars such as Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share argue that any readings of the news should incorporate theories of political economy of the media and cultural theories around audiences (2007, p.19).

This interest, sometimes critical, in practical news literacy programmes offered by Stony Brook, the NLP and others gained more currency when, as Nielsen and Graves (2017, p.1) noted, 'the flow of misinformation around the 2016 US presidential election put the problem of "fake news" on the agenda all over the world'.

Bulger and Davison (2018 p.1) outline how, in the US over the following year, the media literacy movement quickly became 'a center of gravity for countering "fake news'. They describe a 'steady stream of announcements about media literacy' as educators, legislators, philanthropists and technologists raced to push resources towards media literacy programmes (Bulger and Davison, 2018, p.5).

In the UK context, both news literacy education and the literature surrounding it are significantly less well developed than in the US. However, there are signs that a similar debate around the funding and priorities of news literacy are beginning to develop.

As David Buckingham highlighted in a March 2019 blog post: 'In the wake of growing concerns over 'fake news' and disinformation, many media organisations [in the UK] are getting involved in teaching what

they call "news literacy".'

There are a growing number of voices in academic (Livingstone, 2018) and policy (DCMS) circles that argue that the current, piecemeal offer is inadequate and that digital literacy must be somehow embedded in the schools curriculum.

In the current absence of this, however, university journalism departments are welcoming students who for the most part have had little or no explicit news literacy education.

These teenagers are exposed to the same 'extraordinary landscape of information abundance' and enormous 'literacy burden' as other citizens, as noted by McDougall and Pereira in their UK country report for the European Literacy Network (2017, p. 14).

As long ago as 1999, Reese called - in a US context - for journalism departments to create not just trainee journalists but a press-literate public (1999, p. 70). Fleming (2012, p. 18) writes in her PhD thesis on Stonybrook's programme that Schneider's central idea in establishing the Center for News Literacy was that by teaching these skills, journalism departments could go from being the providers of professional journalism training, peripheral to their wider institutions, to having an essential role in equipping the wider student body to deal with communications revolution. This was and is an enormous ambition, and there are those at the other end of the spectrum who believe that news literacy has no place on a journalism degree. This study hopes to fill a gap in the literature by shining some light on the views of journalism academics in the UK.

Study and Method

The purpose of the survey was to gain the widest possible picture of the current state of news literacy teaching on journalism courses at UK universities. This was a qualitative research project involving an online survey followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with a sample of those who completed that survey. The aim of the interviews, which are ongoing at the time of writing, is to enrich the survey data with in-depth questioning of selected academics about their news literacy teaching. Our key research questions were:

1)   To what extent is news literacy being taught on undergraduate journalism programmes in the UK?

2)   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?

Context

The researchers created an online survey, administered using the Qualtrics programme and distributed to prospective respondents via personalised links sent to their institutional email addresses via this programme.

The inclusion criteria for the survey 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 undergraduate degrees in journalism, or similar programmes including a strong element of journalism, in the UK.

Participants

Publicly available email addresses were found using university websites. Respondents were invited to complete the survey, but also given the option of forwarding their personalised link to another member of their journalism department who might have more appropriate knowledge of the news literacy taught at that institution.

The Qualtrics software enabled the researchers to ensure that no more than one response was obtained from any one institution.

The original email containing a link to the survey was sent to 55 BA journalism programme convenors on

A subsequent four reminder emails were sent, the last on April 17 2019.

The survey was kept intentionally brief, in order to maximise response rate, and was pilot tested on a small convenience sample of colleagues before being circulated. It asked for basic factual details such as whether news literacy is taught on the journalism course and at what level, as well as for the respondent's own definition of news literacy and a breakdown of the concepts they teach that could be considered news literacy (for example, mis- and dis-information). The survey also asked respondents to indicate whether they would be interested in introducing more news literacy teaching, which resources if any would support that teaching (e.g. a website featuring open-access resources, or an e-newsletter), and what they already knew about pre-existing news literacy resources.

A total of 32 academic members of staff participated, although three who started the survey did not complete it.

Data collection

There were 29 valid responses from a sample size of 55, giving a response rate of 53 per cent.

Three surveys were started and not finished, hence for all surveys started, there was a 91 per cent completion rate. Those that started the survey but did not complete it answered only question one (Have you heard of the term news literacy before?).

The data from the survey is presented here in anonymised form. It should be noted that the researchers' own institutions, where in both cases 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.

Survey respondents were asked to submit their email address if they would be willing to be contacted by the researchers in relation to the second phase of the project. Of the 29 survey respondents, 16 submitted email addresses. The interviewing of these respondents is ongoing and forms the next stage of our research.

Findings

Participants demonstrated a strong awareness of the term news literacy. Of the 32 respondents to question one (Have you heard of the term news literacy?) only one responded in the negative. (see figure 1).

News literacy survey
May 17, 2019 4:51 AM MDT

Q5 - Have you heard of the term news literacy before?

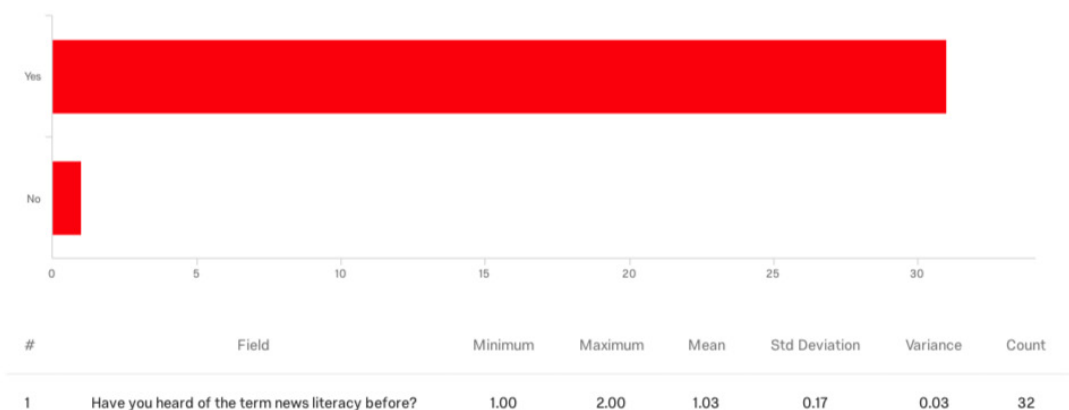| #	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	Have you heard of the term news literacy before?	1.00	2.00	1.03	0.17	0.03	32

Figure 1: Q5 - have you heard of news literacy?

Participants who answered the above question in the positive were then asked to define, using a free text box, what they understood by 'news literacy'. There were 23 responses to this question.

The responses demonstrated a broad understanding of the term, with answers ranging from 'the ability to read and consume news in a critically effective way' to 'understanding the language of news' or simply 'understanding news'.

Others saw news literacy as teaching how to 'sift fact from fiction', 'spot fake news' and the ability to 'distinguish news that is based on reliable fact from propaganda and fake news'.

The next question asked whether participants taught news literacy as a stand-alone subject on the programmes they convened or work on.

Of the 28 eligible to respond to this question, two answered yes while 26 said no.

The participants were then presented with a list of concepts that the researchers believe fall under the subject 'news literacy' and asked to indicate which, if any, they teach on their courses. The table below (figure 2) shows the concepts offered and the response rates. Responses indicated that all the listed concepts are widely taught with the most popular, fake news and mis-information, selected by 27 respondents.

Q7 - Do you teach any of the following concepts on your programme? Please tick all that apply.   Page Options
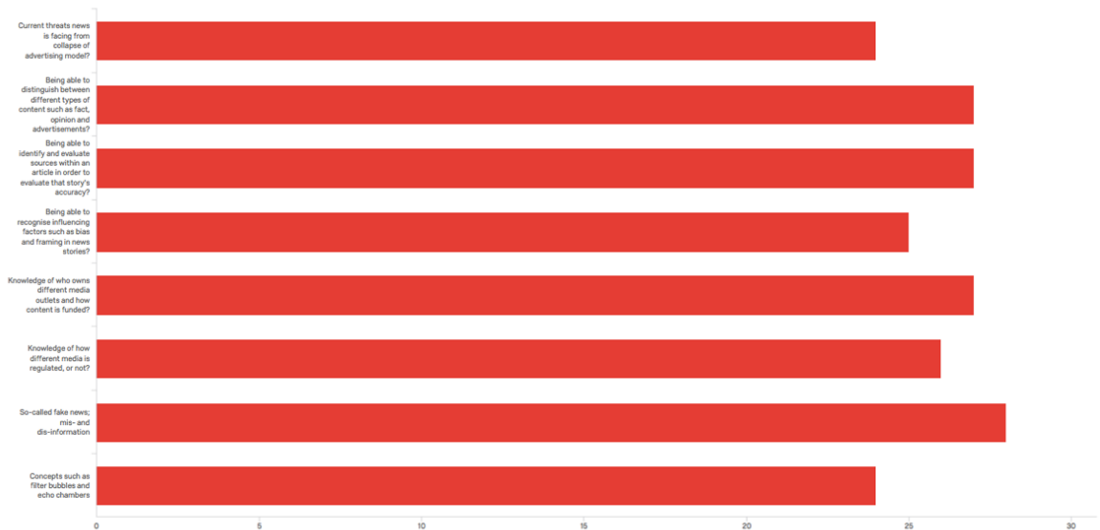
Figure 2: Do you teach any of these concepts?

The next question sought to establish any appetite among participants for introducing stand-alone news literacy workshops, or modules, on to their programmes.

This elicited a strong response, with 19 responding in the affirmative (nine answered definitely yes, four answered probably yes and six answered might or might not). Three participants replied 'probably not' and five said they were already doing so.

For those who responded in the negative to the above question, a follow-up question asked why. Responses were again varied but a theme that emerged is summed up by this answer: 'We already do – but not as a stand-alone subject. It underpins a good deal of our teaching.'

Participants were asked whether they were aware of, or working with, any external organisations offering news literacy training or teaching and of the 21 respondents five replied yes while 16 said no.

Of these, when prompted to list these organisations, one respondent cited the Media Diversity Institute, another listed Google News Labs and the BBC.

One participant listed several: KMTV, BBC News, Sky News, Society of Editors, National Council for the Training of Journalists, KM Media Group, Front Line Club, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

While all of these organisations undoubtedly offer journalism training of some form, we would argue that not all of them run what could be described as news literacy initiatives - a point which is discussed later in this paper.

Finally, participants were asked what kind of resources for news literacy teaching they would be interested in and were able to tick anywhere between none and all four of the options provided, and/or specify others using a free text box. Of the four, a public website featuring downloadable resources for news literacy teaching was the most popular with 17 of the respondents selecting it as an option.

Discussion/ conclusion

This study explored the term news literacy and how it is understood by academics working on, and in most cases leading, over half the undergraduate journalism courses taught at widely recognised higher education institutions in the UK. It asked what the appetite might be for any shared resources and sought to survey awareness of the broader news literacy movement in the UK.

The key finding from this sample is that a standalone subject explicitly defined as 'news literacy' features [almost] nowhere outside of the researchers' own institutions, Liverpool John Moores and Goldsmiths, which do not feature in the survey statistics. 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 term one Level 4 module Introduction to Multimedia Journalism.

However, as outlined above, a large majority of respondents stated that they teach most or all of the concepts that the researchers highlighted as potential constituents of a news literacy syllabus. In short, there is a good deal of what might reasonably be considered 'news literacy' teaching going on within the UK's undergraduate journalism programmes, but rarely is it thought of - or described to students - in those terms.

One reason for this might be that a notable feature of the nascent news literacy movement in the UK, which has seen multiple actors from the media industry and third sector establish educational initiatives of varying scale and focus, is that news literacy is itself a contested term with different definitions that reflect the priorities and perspectives of those different actors.

As previously discussed, the UK News Literacy Network, established in August 2018 as a forum for educators, news platforms and literacy advocates, adopted the Stony Brook definition that news literacy is the 'ability to use critical thinking skills to judge the reliability and credibility of news reports, whether they come via print, television, the internet or social media'.

However, what this means in practice differs significantly even between member organisations of the NLN.

Our survey indicates that this divergence is present within the journalism academy.

As noted above, when asked to define news literacy, the survey participants offered a range of answers, some more closely aligned to the Stony Brook definition than others.

Of the 23 recorded responses to this question, five replied broadly that news literacy was about how to sift or identify news as distinct from other content (be it opinion, propaganda or advertising). One respondent replied: 'The ability to sift fact from fiction in contemporary communication'.

Of the 18 other responses, the majority were concerned with news literacy as a close reading of the news, best encapsulated by this response: 'News literacy is the ability to critically read and interpret the news.'

This divergence in responses speaks to the broader arguments outlined above as to what news literacy is or should be in the pre-university setting.

Bulger and Davison (2018, p.5) note that media literacy in the US has become the centre of gravity for countering fake news.

This is also the case in the UK, where the news industry is often offered as part of the solution to countering the problems of 'fake news'.

For example the DCMS' interim report on fake news (DCMS, 2018, p.62) states, in a section discussing news literacy initiatives in the UK, how 'The Times and The Sunday Times have recently launched a media literacy scheme in schools, to help pupils how to spot "fake news". The scheme will be available for pupils in secondary schools, colleges and sixth form. The programme is in partnership with News UK's News Academy'.

Further, Dame Frances Cairncross in her February 2019 review into the future of journalism calls for the government 'to develop a media literacy strategy working with Ofcom, the online platforms and news publishers and broadcaster' (Cairncross, 2019 p.10).

The authors do not reject the potential for the news media industry to play a useful role in the development of news literacy education. However, the findings of this survey indicate that HE journalism educators would argue that any comprehensive news literacy initiative must include scrutiny of our news platforms and providers themselves. For citizens - and particularly trainee journalism students - to be truly news literate, a spotlight must be shone over mainstream news production process as well as over the purveyors of mis- and dis-information known to be acting both in the UK and globally.

As one respondent said: 'News literacy is being able to understand the processes and attitudes which lead to an event becoming a news report, including bias, ownerships, propaganda, the limitations of newsgathering, reporting techniques and traditions.'

As noted above, some 70 per cent of participants when asked whether they would be interested in introducing this to their own journalism courses as a standalone subject said that they would definitely or might be interested.

Of this group, all had stated they already teach at least six of the [eight] news literacy concepts that might be expected to feature within a so-defined news literacy syllabus.

It is worth noting that the concept most respondents said they taught was that of so-called fake news, or mis- and dis-information. This is perhaps not surprising given the UK context as set out above, but the answer does not allow at this stage for further unpicking of how it is taught and in what context.

This indicates that there is some level of interest within the journalism academy in the idea of introducing news literacy as a discrete subject. It should be noted, however, that early interview data for the next phase of research indicates resistance from some quarters to the idea of ring-fencing news literacy as a separate and finite portion of a journalism course. One survey respondent who said he 'probably would' be interested in introducing a standalone news literacy element commented during interview that on reflection he had decided against the idea because, in effect, his entire degree programme is in some senses news literacy, and that journalism educators should not be teaching those skills in isolation from their wider courses.

This echoes a sentiment shared by other interviewees; a journalism course inherently teaches news literacy and therefore there is little need to explicitly teach it.

The researchers do not reject this. However, we have both seen encouraging results in terms of student performance and feedback since introducing news literacy teaching, explicitly defined as such, to our undergraduate degree courses.

We argue therefore that there is merit in colleagues considering the pedagogic value of drawing together the various concepts and practical, critical skills that constitute basic news literacy into a dedicated module, or part of a module. This does not preclude such concepts also being embedded across the course as a whole.

We define basic news literacy as the ability to analyse critically both content and crucially, the context in which it has been created.

While news literacy education within society at large must necessarily be tailored to suit different demographic groups and levels of education, we believe that wherever possible, and certainly for journalism students, news literacy teaching must include issues of ownership, and how financial, political and logistical realities shape the news that people read.

If these concepts outlined above are under the umbrella of one module, or part of a module, all the better. Where this is not appropriate or possible, and such concepts are more diffused throughout the course, we would argue that students might benefit from lecturers making explicit the importance of critical analysis and understanding of the news and its political and economic context, rather than assuming that this is evident to them.

We question whether the majority of incoming students possess the meta-cognitive skills necessary to understand that what they are learning are news and digital literacy skills unless that point is made explicit.

These beliefs are backed up by a growing body of information, referenced above in our introduction, that reveals how ill-equipped most young people are to navigate information in an online context, and understand the provenance of what they are reading.

We argue that there is potential value in students being aware that they are learning these skills, and in having their importance explained rather than left implicit.

This argument is backed up from several of our academic interviewees from stage two of this project (currently unpublished). One respondent said: 'It is interesting to think about teaching it as opposed to "they'll pick it up by osmosis"' while another said: 'We do need to point out to them that this is news literacy. I'm sold on that idea.' Another respondent said: 'I think labels do help – I think if you explain 'this is now what

we are doing' that can be really helpful for students.'

We furthermore argue that students should be encouraged to develop and use their news literacy skills in their function as news consumers and citizens, as well as in their capacity as students and content creators. Finally, we suggest that one reason for the journalism academy's absence from the wider policy and industry discussion around news literacy is that we are not explicit about our engagement with and expertise around teaching these kinds of concepts even though, as our survey suggests, they are being widely taught within undergraduate courses.

We as journalism academics do not connect our work with the growing public conversation because many of us don't talk - or perhaps even think - about it in the same terms.

There was an interest from participants in the creation of some shared teaching resources around news literacy, with a website hosting exercises being the most popular choice (as noted above). However, during interviews for the second phase of this project several respondents expressed doubt they would have the time to engage properly with the content and indicated they were more comfortable using their own examples.

There were only five positive answers (out of 21) to the question: 'Are you aware of, or working with, any external organisation(s) who offer news literacy training or teaching?'

Of those mentioned (outlined above in the findings section) institutions such as the Frontline Club and the NCTJ are not, to our knowledge, carrying out explicit news literacy initiatives though are working in closely related fields such as fact checking and verification – once again pointing to the diverging definitions of news literacy that abound.

Further, given the multiplicity of news literacy initiatives that have launched in the UK over the past two years, and the attention given to the subject in reports by Dame Francis Cairncross (2019) and the DCMS Committee, (2018,9) it is interesting that journalism academics do not appear to have registered in detail the various projects that have launched. This might reflect the fact that most of the activity is directed at schools level.

It might too reflect that the majority of journalism educators surveyed for this article are more concerned with teaching students how to perform critical readings of the news in order for them to become news literate. As discussed, many of the news literacy initiatives mentioned above are more concerned with setting 'quality news' apart from other forms of online information.

The researchers believe therefore that these findings indicate a gulf between policy makers, industry and journalism academics that could usefully be bridged in the interests of developing the coherent and unified approach to news/ critical digital literacy called for by parliamentarians.

An approach which, rather than leaving the work of news literacy to the news providers, scrutinises their output too.

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