

Distinguishing fake news

Lessons should be taught in NY, SBU dean tells Regents

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ALBANY — Lessons in “news literacy” — the ability to distinguish fake news from the real thing — should be offered in classrooms throughout New York as a matter of public urgency, the founder of Stony Brook University’s School of Journalism has told the state’s education policymaking body.

Journalism Dean Howard Schneider called on the state Board of Regents to act with dispatch in encouraging teachers and students alike to become more critical consumers of news reports. Fake stories, he noted, are increasingly transmitted electronically — for example, via tweets, blogs, podcasts and postings on social media.

The alternative could be successive generations of young people unable to differentiate between accurate news and the phony variety popping up on their cellphones and laptops, the veteran educator and former journalist suggested.

“What do we need to do?” Schneider asked as he paced the Regents’ ornate conference room, on the main floor of the State Education Department Building. “We need, in my view, to work together to create, in essence, a new literacy for the 21st century. We need to do something bold and transformative, and we need to get it into all of our schools.”

The Regents met with Schneider for 40 minutes last week during one of their monthly conferences.

Stony Brook’s School of Journalism already has gone a long way in showing students how to approach the news analytically and how to discern the reliability of news sources.

Since 2007, the school’s Center for News Literacy has offered courses taken by more than 10,000 undergraduates on the Stony Brook campus alone. In addition, sponsors said, the curriculum is used by 22 other universities and colleges in the United States, as well as those in 10 other countries.



Howard Schneider, dean of SBU’s School of Journalism, says “young people are most vulnerable to being duped . . . by fake information.”

Last year, the center launched a six-week online course as well. News Literacy also is taught in public schools in the districts of Cold Spring Harbor, Northport-East Northport and Longwood, and on Coney Island in Brooklyn, with additional schools signing up, sponsors said.

This summer, the literacy center plans to offer a weeklong training session for teachers interested in bringing the curriculum to their own schools.

Schneider, in his presentation last week, invited Regents to join in the effort, suggesting that the topic of news literacy could be inserted within the state’s curriculum guides in English and social studies.

State Education Commissioner MaryEllen Elia indicated at the end of the meeting that board members or staff would visit schools where news literacy is taught to observe the effects for themselves.

She noted, however, that many teachers already are well aware of the necessity of showing students how to judge the validity of what they read and hear.

“Believe me,” said the commissioner, a former teacher herself, “social studies teachers are rabid about being sure that people can understand sources.”

One question is whether peo-

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ple are getting the message.

As evidence that is not always the case, Schneider cited an incident from the 2016 presidential election campaign when a news site carrying fictitious news reported that Pope Francis had endorsed Republican candidate Donald Trump.

The pope issued a denial. Nonetheless, more than 868,000 Facebook viewers shared the original incorrect story with acquaintances. Only 33,000 shared the later denial.

Those figures were provided by the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University and by Snopes, a fact-checking service.

“I would like to tell you that our students, the students that we teach in New York, are really



Jonathon Anzalone of Stony Brook University’s Center for News Literacy teaches a class on Feb. 7.

on the ball and are on top of this,” said Schneider, a former Newsday editor. “In fact, and this is pretty depressing, the results are the opposite. Young people are most vulnerable to being duped and fooled and manipulated by fake information.”

A growing number of states and nonprofit agencies are involved in the movement to promote both news literacy and the broader concept of media literacy, which also covers such forms as advertising, music and electronic games.

At least 11 states have passed or considered legislation to encourage instruction in those

subjects, according to Media Literacy Now, an advocacy group headquartered in Watertown, Massachusetts.

The News Literacy Project, based in Bethesda, Maryland, is another nonprofit organization that provides schools with education materials aimed at helping students distinguish between fact and fiction, verified information and spin.

Project organizers said their classroom, after-school and digital programs have served nearly 25,000 students since 2009 in New York City, Chicago, Houston and the Washington, D.C., area.