

With non-stop news popping up on our digital devices, Frances Rafferty asks how journalists can play a role in helping people make sense of it all



Matt Kenyon

“Hey Alexa, what's the news?”

Hey Alexa, are your stories second-sourced, the data confirmed by the Office of National Statistics and are you following the NUJ code of practice?

Hey Alexa, is my news coming from a neo-liberal media mogul, Saudi Arabian prince, Ofcom-regulated broadcaster, left-leaning Trust or Keith’s mum?

Half the people who own voice-activated digital appliances use them for news and information. Because the ways people receive their news proliferate, with Facebook, Instagram, Google, iTunes, podcasts, WhatsApp, Snapchat, YouTube and the smart speaker in your sitting room all compete with the TV, radio and newspapers, greater sophistication in media literacy is needed.

For the journalist the story is about the who, why, what, where and when. For the reader it has always been: “Why are they telling me this?” But, increasingly it is also “Who is telling me this?” as the constant bombardment and buzz of information from our mobile devices makes it hard to track where the news without mastheads is coming from.

For young people, many of them whom learned to use their iPad in the pram, it can be a minefield. They are constantly targeted by a range of vloggers and “influencers” paid by

advertisers to promote their wares among the make-up tips and whacky videos. Digital marketing company, Exposure Ninja, claims on its website: “A whopping 81 per cent of the population trusts the advice they get from bloggers, making them very powerful advocates for any brand online.”

On the first Monday of Media Literacy Week (18 to 22 March), the NUJ brought together a panel of media experts who work on projects to promote better understanding of the news process, particularly for young people.

Michelle Stanistreet, NUJ general secretary, said the union had a long tradition of supporting ethical journalism, promoting a diverse media industry and regularly works with journalism colleges. “Boosting our critical capacity to weed out what’s been fact-checked from what has not is the challenge we all face and a skill we need to help our children acquire from the earliest possible age,” she said. “Trust in journalism underpins all this work – as does having a media which reflects the world it depicts.”

Kate Morris, a former journalist and convenor of the BA in Journalism at Goldsmiths, University of London, said the Edelman Trust Barometer 2019 found that 55 per cent of British people believe the media does not represent their views, however, since the Brexit referendum, a third said they had read more political news.

Part of this lack of trust, she said, was due to poor media plurality in the UK. Just three companies (News UK, Daily Mail Group and Reach) dominated 83 per cent of the national newspaper market. Five local news groups covered 80 per cent of the market and two companies owned nearly half of all commercial analogue radio stations, she said, quoting new figures from the Media Reform Coalition show.

The other cause was the lack of investment in journalism and the cut in numbers of journalists. She cited figures from the media consultancy, Mediatique, which in its report for the Cairncross review into the press, estimated the number of front-line journalists had fallen from 23,000 in 2007, to 17,000 today. “This leads to less fact-checking, less in-depth investigative reporting and more so-called churnalism,” said Kate Morris.

Journalists had a role to play in rebuilding the trust in our news and in helping young people how to spot quality news that can be trusted and to understand why it is vital to a functioning democracy, she added.

Even journalism students found it difficult to distinguish from news and advertising copy: “Pressure on newspapers, caused by the loss of online advertising revenue to Google and Facebook, has led to some resorting to clickbait copy to generate clicks for advertisers, and the blurring of advertorials and rise of native advertising is skewing good journalism.”

The Guardian Foundation’s NewsWise helps 9- to 11-year-olds recognise disinformation, bias, opinion, rumour and media-driven hoaxes such as the Momo Challenge. The

foundation, funded by Google and working in partnership with the PSHE (Physical, Social, Health and Economic) Association and National Literacy Fund, found that only 2 per cent of children had the critical literacy skills they needed to tell whether a news story was real or fake.

Angie Pitt, NewsWise project director, said: “If we want to build trust, we can’t be a closed shop, we have to open our doors. There is a classroom at The Guardian and we also go out to schools all over the UK. We create teams of sub-editors and editors with an editor-in-chief (who has a visor) to show them how to produce news stories and fact-check and we run training sessions for teachers to develop critical literacy skills.”

They learn about the role of journalists in holding power to account. A recent lesson discussing the Windrush scandal proved popular. “They enjoyed discussing the issue and having their say on an ‘adult’ subject; they had a clear view on how unfair it had been,” said Angie Pitt.

The BBC’s Young Reporter scheme plays a similar role for 11- to 18-year-olds, working in partnership with schools, colleges, youth organisations and charities, and the young people get to meet BBC journalists and presenters, such as Huw Edwards and the Newsbeat team. Like NewsWise it creates resources for schools and colleges.

NUJ members are involved in other schemes, such as Press Pass, a week-long initiative set up in 2012 between the Irish press industry and schools which is held every November. Pupils learn about the writing, analysis, preparation and photography involved in putting a newspaper together. Holly Powell-Jones runs Online Media Law, which educates social media users about media law and ethics in the UK – including in schools.

Catherine Deveney is a journalist and author working on the NUJ Media Skills for Schools project in the Highlands. It teaches teachers and pupils how to produce newspapers and radio shows with high journalistic and ethical standards. It nurtures young talent and offers pathways, such as apprenticeships, to young people interested in media careers.

The biggest challenge is the funding, Catherine Deveney says: “The project is the perfect vehicle for several government strategies, but funding is piecemeal and there is a lack of cohesion and coherence. This is common among many of these projects and it is too important to have a hit and run approach to such an important issue -- it needs to be sustainable and embedded knowledge.”

Any ideas Alexa?

The three-second challenge

Lucie Spicer is education co-ordinator of Shout Out UK which promotes political engagement among young people. The project teaches them to think critically about the

information they consume. Media Minded, a series of events held in Birmingham, Belfast and Newcastle last year, gave tips to avoid “being fooled by the media” which included asking them to analyse their emotional response to a story, to be aware of their own biases and to look further into a story’s source. They were shown how images can be easily be manipulated. “Most young people will only read the Metro if there is no Wi-Fi,” said Lucie. “Instagram and Snapchat are the main sources of their news. They prefer YouTube to TV. They need to learn how to work out how to access news that is accurate and can be trusted. My challenge is to get them in the habit of counting to three while they think about a story or link before sharing it on social media.”