

## Students need help sorting out what's real in online world

We need guidance to navigate today's news and social media, write **Jocelyn Nettlefold** and **Kathleen Williams**

From *The Mercury*, 6 September 2018, pages 20-21

# Students need help sorting out what's

MOST of this generation of children and adolescents have never known life without digital media. Almost all Australian teenagers, two-thirds of primary school-aged children and one-third of pre-schoolers have access to their own tablet or smartphone.

Whatever age you are, more of us are consuming news online, and increasingly we are turning to social media to source our news. However, as we increase digital news consumption, particularly on social media platforms, distrust in those sources also rises. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report: Australia 2018, part of a survey that covers 37 countries, shows that

**We need guidance to navigate today's news and social media, write Jocelyn Nettlefold and Kathleen Williams**

while Australians' trust in the media has risen overall, 65 per cent of us are concerned about what is real and what is not when it comes to online news.

With social media now established as the main source of accessing news for Australians aged 18 to 24, these levels of doubt and distrust pose big consequences for how they learn and participate in society. At school, the abundance of

opportunities to create, consume and communicate content through digital and traditional media can bring exciting benefits including improving some cognitive skills such as literacy, visual attention and executive functioning. Yet it is argued digital connectivity can also disrupt learning, with some experts blaming mobile phone distraction for lower Australian student

performance in international assessments.

There is mounting evidence that Australian students need more help with media literacy, at school and at home. In February, we surveyed 97 teachers in Catholic, independent and state school sectors in Tasmania about the challenges of teaching and understanding media literacy in the classroom. The snapshot research data from primary and secondary school teachers highlights serious concerns about students' abilities to identify false news and understand the social and technical complexity of the internet. It suggests teachers need more professional

development and resources to help explain the news media environment and the way participants are engaged in it, including social and ethical dimensions.

A majority of those surveyed (77 per cent) feel equipped to guide students on whether news stories are true and can be trusted, but nearly a quarter say they cannot. Overwhelmingly teachers view critical thinking about media as important but when asked how often they explore critical engagement with news stories, nearly a quarter of them said they rarely turned it into a classroom activity. Constraints on teacher knowledge, time and resources

are likely to be influential factors limiting the teaching of media literacy in schools.

Of course, what happens in schools is only part of building community understanding about the complexity of today's news and information environments. We are being subjected to high volumes of misleading, manipulated and fabricated content online. The automatic segmentation and curation of content shapes it to an individual's interests and worldview, and this data-targeting can drive polarisation. Our verification skills (if indeed, we assume to have any) are being constantly tested by new video and audio trickery.



# real in online world

Better evidence-based research must inform public debate and policy making about media change. As social media is central to how people access news, transparency from platforms and newsrooms is an important way to rebuild trust. Journalists, while serving as honest and reliable distributors of news, need to become more involved with new ways of helping citizens develop the necessary skills to identify quality information. The concept of media literacy education is therefore being approached in new ways, at the school level and in the community as it is increasingly viewed by

researchers to be one of the weapons against false news. Innovations that focus on technology and policy initiatives, like new laws enacted in Europe, can only take us so far.

While it is up to citizens to determine what constitutes reliable information, they need the knowledge and tools to participate in our media-saturated, information-rich society. Children and teenagers, who have never known a world without the internet, deserve creative and engaging ways of sifting fact from fiction, with more support at home, from their schools and the community. Reflecting international

evidence and experience, there is a need for media organisations, academics and educators to collaborate more deeply to tackle these challenges. Transparency and trust in news and media

literacy will be the focus of "Navigating the News", a national conference hosted by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the University of Tasmania, involving media, academia, educators and youth in Hobart on Monday and Tuesday (September 10-11). It is vital for democracy that we work out how to better equip and empower people to better understand and participate in today's complex

news and information landscape. It promises to be even more complicated tomorrow.

**Journalist and academic Dr Jocelyn Nettlefold is national Media Education Partnerships Manager at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and director of the ABC-UTAS Media Literacy Project.**

**Dr Kathleen Williams is Head of Discipline, Journalism, Media and Communications at the University of Tasmania.**

**Their report A Snapshot of Media Literacy in Australian Schools is being released by the Institute for the Study of Social Change today. See it at [www.utas.edu.au/social-change](http://www.utas.edu.au/social-change)**