

Pop filter bubble: Teach teens about news literacy

By Roger Ruthhart | Posted: Sunday, November 30, 2014 12:00 am

Whether you are young or old, rich or poor, well-educated or not, your life is being impacted in ways that you need to better understand. This is one of the most important issues I have addressed.

If you are a parent, teacher or administrator you need to pay special attention.

A June 2012 study of American youth “Participatory Politics: New Media and Youth Political Action” found that 84 percent said they are bombarded with information and “would benefit from learning more about how to gauge what news is trustworthy.”

The need for young people to develop their own standards for discerning truthful, reliable information is even more important because they are creators as well as consumers. Whether they are emailing, texting, posting on Facebook, uploading to YouTube, tweeting or blogging, they are increasingly part of the national conversation.

Yet the concept of news literacy is not widely discussed in schools.

A Carnegie-Knight task force reported in 2007 that mandatory testing had led to a decline in the discussion of news in classrooms, squeezing out one of the best ways to prepare students for their role as citizens at a time when it may be needed more than ever.

In the digital world, rumors, lies, twisted truths, and bad quotes can all take on a life of their own -- a life that continues forever. Not everything is what it seems to be.

That is compounded by the fact that we all process information through our own biases. If we read or hear something, we are likely to embrace or dismiss it based on what we believe.

This process was explained recently in a presentation to the Northern Illinois Newspaper Association. by Peter Adams, senior vice president of educational programs for The News Literacy Project, which has an office in Chicago.

With that background, said Mr. Adams, we need to understand the “filter bubble” and how it works.



Peter Adams, senior vice president of educational programs for The News Literacy Project.

Everything we encounter through the Internet is personalized for us. Search engines have complex algorithms that filter and sort information based on what they know of our interests from previous searches. There is no singular result for any search term, Mr. Adams explained.

If someone who follows international politics does a search for “Egypt” they will receive an entirely different result than someone who is a world traveler, for example.

If your political bent is to the left, your search for “Obama” will come up with entirely different results than someone who is conservative. If you thought cable news puts a slant on information you receive, it’s nothing compared to what happens through Internet searches.

Facebook does the same thing -- deciding the top posts on a page based on your demonstrated interests, Mr. Adams explained.

“Algorithms also orchestrate ad responses the same way and will orchestrate our lives,” he said. The danger is that none of us are living life based on the same information and facts.

“We are in separate but parallel universes that don’t have shared facts. The filter bubble as an echo chamber is excellent ... but there can be no national dialogue. How can we have meaningful civic discourse?” he questioned.

People use their bias to form their opinions about the news media which remain the only real free and independent source of information. “Newspaper websites, which are not customized to the user, will soon seem quaint,” he said.

NLP is trying to combat this concern with educational programs aimed at middle school and high school students.

Today’s students have access to unprecedented amounts of information. But they are also confronted with the task of determining the reliability of sources of “news” with varying credibility.

NLP has developed classroom, after-school and digital units and workshops.

Teachers, and active and retired journalists, work together to engage students. For those of us not located in NLP’s core cities of New York, Chicago and Washington D.C., there are video and webinar programs available. The digital program, for instance, includes 9 digital lessons, an online video conference and a 4-part online Power Point series. Programs are aligned with Common Core Standards and teachers can pick from a menu of final projects. NLP also conducts summer workshops.

The programs have been well received by students and many said it was the first they had heard of “idea shaping,” said Mr. Adams. “Teachers say they learn as much as their students.”

The NLP programs are aimed at students in an effort to better prepare them to be able to weigh information and make well-informed decisions as they become adults. But Mr. Adams cautioned that the filter bubble may impact senior citizens even more because they grew up in a different age and operate under different assumptions.

We need to understand how the digital world is capable of shaping our world views if we don't view information with skepticism.

Each year at this time I have been reminding readers that despite predictions of our demise, newspapers are still here serving their communities. But it is even more important to understand the issues that impact our lives and to be skeptical of information sources that frame those issues. It's a skill we need to teach our youth and newspapers will continue to play an important roll. I will personally get involved with any school that can use my help.