MEDIA literacy and how to encourage it – particularly among “youth” – was the theme of an NUJ event to celebrate Media Literacy Week 2019, which started on 18 April.

Open by NUJ General Secretary Michelle Stanisstreet, the event included speakers with extensive experience of working to promote media literacy skills. Michelle noted that the NUJ, with its strong Code of Conduct, is keen on forging links with “schools and colleges… something that the NUJ… wants to build on and develop”.

Kate Morris, former assistant news editor with the i and now teaching and researching media literacy at Goldsmiths, University of London, says the real challenge with today’s degree students is to get them interested in news. They’d rather be writing opinion pieces, she says. A big proportion of respondents to the Cairncross Review (into the sustainability of high-quality journalism), she noted, felt that money should not go to journalism because “we don’t trust them.” A Reuters Institute survey showed that 58 per cent of respondents were worried about fabricated news, but they struggled to find actual examples of it.

She cited one case of misinformation – the widely-circulated “fact” that more children die from suicide in UK than of any other cause. Our bullshit detectors “they know is obviously cannot be true, and a quick look at the Office of National Statistics shows that it’s cancer”.

The problem we face today is one of information overload – we can no longer recall where we read the information (and misinformation) we receive.

Clickbait critique

Kate listed some of the challenges facing publishing. With ad revenues tanking, content “they know is going to generate clicks” gets priority. She recalled at the Indy a story that was clearly in the public interest, about murky goings on at Westminster. Its clearly in the public interest, about Indy a story that was “rewrote something about someone from London”.

Teenage is too late

The term “fake news” is used by nine-year-olds, Angie says – trying to instil media literacy in teenagers “is too late”. Even very young children hear news “in the car, on the radio” or see it at their local newsagents when buying sweets, but they’re unable to process it. Even the very young have to make decisions about whether or not to share stories they’ve received via social media.

NewsWise also has an Education Centre with classrooms at the Guardian. Schools can come for free to learn how the process is made. They take “authentic newsroom experiences” to schools, with simulated newsrooms where children take on editor and other roles. The simulated editor even “wears a visor”.

Our job in the media...

Media literacy is “not just the job of the teachers – our job in the media to share our skills… to invite young people in to see what we do”, says Angie. NewsWise’s journalists go into school and talk about fact-checking and a day in their life. One of the students’ favourite lessons with NewsWise is on the Windrush scandal: it formed part of a lesson about holding power to account.“Children like to discuss adult grown-up issues in a way accessible to them.”

Janette Ballard manages the BBC’s media literacy outreach project (formerly BBC Young Reporter) for 11-18-year-olds. This has now expanded into other countries including Kenya, India and Brazil. Part of it is about fake news. The project trains 125 staff volunteers (including journalists) and community groups to go into schools for one-hour workshop, using open source resources available online via BBC Academy and supported by the BBC’s Reality Check.

The core thinking around the BBC’s project is “around stopping and checking, comparing with other news outlets, who you trust and why”. They’re in the process of getting their material evaluated – currently very little by way of media literacy materials are evaluated.

Lucie Spicer is education coordinator of Shout Out UK, which has

From left: Angie Pitt, Catherine Deveney, Kate Morris, Lucie Spicer and Janette Ballard. Yes, an all-female panel! Image © Matt Salusbury