

THE NEW MEDIA STARS

Students have a passion for new media – so how can they learn to consume it and make it wisely? *Victoria Lambert* reports

News doesn't just travel fast these days. It moves at hyperspeed, often before anyone has had a chance to fact check or verify. Fake news is real.

And for young people (Gen Z and Gen Alpha) who have grown up entirely in a digital age, this offers both opportunity and threat. We know our children consume and create different types of media to their predecessors, especially to find out what's happening in the world – from politics to business, current events to entertainment. Their use of video content and personal branding far exceeds older generations. They are disruptive, confident and can scan across multiple platforms with lightning speed.

But all this does not mean there is no room for education and guidance. Schools still have a duty to teach the skills of analysis and critical thinking in the context of all the new media. So how are they tackling this wild frontier?

At St Dunstan's College in London, assistant head (academic) Helen Riddle agrees that her students' deep engagement with media is increasingly through digital platforms, rather than the hard copies of newspapers or magazines which their parents knew and grew up with. 'While many younger students continue to read *The Week* in print,' she says, 'the overwhelming trend is toward online content, particularly when they engage with media at home. Students see digital media as more accessible, immediate and environmentally sustainable.'

Ofcom's 2024 News Consumption in the UK report backs this up. It reveals that online sources are most popular among the

younger age groups, with 88 percent of 16- to 24-year-olds using them for news. This is mainly down to use of social media; eight in ten (82 percent) of young adults use social platforms, but only half of 16- to 24-year-olds (49 percent) use television for news.

In contrast, television is by far the main news platform used by people aged 55 and over (85 percent). Only 28 percent of this age group use social media to keep up with the news.

Toni Tasic, media studies teacher at London Park Schools (LPS) Mayfair, LPS Hybrid and LPS Sixth, agrees that most students' main portal to the news is social media and the algorithms, adding that they tend to pick up recommendations for their own personal consumption. Tasic says: 'Lower schoolers (aged seven to nine) tend to take more influence from their parents, and those with media-literate parents can start showing interest in some quality canonical texts from a very early age. I've spoken with 11-year-old fans of *Breaking Bad* and *Twin Peaks*, for example. However, many of them don't show much interest in media like newspapers, magazines, podcasts or even television.'

'Older students seem to be more selective and pursue leads of interest. They might share recommendations and get into things together, especially large mainstream phenomena like *Squid Game*. From this, some of them develop relationships with linked texts, like *Battle Royale* or even dystopian fiction.'

With news and entertainment more intertwined than ever before, schools have been working hard to create teaching programmes that can tackle a subject of this complexity.

St Dunstan's innovative Stuart Additional Curriculum 'ensures





students leave the college with the skills and knowledge that will allow them to thrive in a changing world and make sense of this digital landscape,' says Riddle. 'We plan sequences of lessons for all ages that encourage students to think critically and act responsibly in a world where information is abundant, but not always reliable.'

Some of the language students' use of media is revealing, she adds. 'Several mention they prefer online sources because they are free, suggesting a transactional understanding of media access. This outlook reinforces the importance of teaching students to consider not just how they consume content, but what it costs – whether in terms of accuracy, privacy or influence. 'Discussions around fact checking, journalistic responsibility, the importance of a free press and the rules around libel and defamation are woven into our curriculum, so students develop a muscle of "cautious, curious, cynicism" when encountering information, whether in print or online.'

Students at Hurtwood House in Surrey are expected to investigate news content from a diverse range of participants in public discourses, says head Cosmo Jackson. This includes content from legacy news providers, citizen journalists and bad actors, and students are taught to consider how online algorithms prioritise or sideline certain voices.

Jackson explains: 'Students study media plurality and freedom in the UK and other parts of the world to develop an understanding of the impact of different media systems and regulatory models, and how these affect individual liberty and democracy.'

Do they find it easy to navigate fake versus real news? 'The students are very savvy,' says Jackson, 'and quickly recognise some of the signs that images may be AI generated, including – but not limited to – extra fingers.'

'Some of the topics they study, such as regulation and media ecology, involve analysing the impact of misinformation and disinformation. They recently looked into the online discourses that arose from the Southport attacks, and the role these played in the social unrest that followed. They consider the sources that distribute news as well as the political agendas, and other motivations that may underpin online news.'

St Dunstan's students are also encouraged to interrogate the media they consume, says Helen Riddle. This includes checking the credibility of

sources, seeking out diverse viewpoints, understanding rhetorical techniques and reflecting on how news impacts mental health. Students learn to recognise bias, understand the role of algorithms and explore how media shapes public discourse.

Tackling fake news and disinformation is crucial, says Toni Tasic. 'This is part of the staff consciousness and something we filter at a subject level (when it becomes relevant to our work) and also in PSHE, where we examine such issues and case studies.'

'However, in the post-Trump era, this is quite difficult, as hardly anything in the mainstream news appears consequential or relevant. Instead, there is such a thick fog of disinformation and fake news that interpretation has to be baked into daily life.'

Tasic is passionate that this is an area we cannot ignore. 'Personally, I feel there is not enough time in the day to practise this. We recommend students use reputable news sources, like the BBC, but also that they evaluate perspectives between mainstream news providers and filter the "truth" from this.'

'For example, when evaluating ideas about Brexit in different tabloids, the fact that many outlets flip-flop on such issues – and that perspectives shift so rapidly at a political level – means students tend to adhere to those interpreters and mediators who make sense of this on a personal level. It also means students get disaffected quickly with having to constantly filter.'

And young people are keen to learn. At Francis Holland, Regent's Park, head and deputy head girls Amelie and Reia have plenty of ideas about fake news. 'It is important for young people to be able to process and engage with all the information shown in the media,' they say. 'Since there is a lot of untrue information circulating, it's also important to know how to differentiate between facts and false news. As we get older, jobs will become more reliant on and exposed to the media, so it's especially pertinent that young people know how to navigate these spaces.'

Interestingly, they are not closed off to more traditional media. 'We believe that legacy media is essential because it offers trusted and verified reporting. Since it must perform to an editorial standard, it is easier to hold these types of media accountable for the information they give out.' Employment is the

other side of the media coin; many young people will go on to futures in the media of some kind, whether a traditional route such as newsgathering or one more entertainment-led, like creating online content. They may want to go into the technical side, such as building platforms or working in IT.

At Francis Holland, Regent's Park and Francis Holland, Sloane Square, their Futures programmes contain numerous initiatives tailored to opening pupils' eyes to media careers and building the relevant skillsets. The schools have seen recent leavers go on to study media-related degrees such as Visual Arts and Film at Durham, and Film and Television at Bristol.

Head girls Chloe and Regina at the Sloane Square school, are interested in career implications in different ways. While Chloe has strong family connections in the media, she is not sure which branch would best suit her. 'I am pursuing work experience to help develop my understanding of different roles within the media,' she says. For Regina, understanding the media will be a boon for her planned career in law. 'I think it will offer me useful transferrable skills going into my working life.'

The school supports these interests outside lessons through regular working lunches and weekly speaker programme talks, which allow guests to teach pupils about their careers.

At Francis Holland, Regent's Park, Amelie and Reia point out some of the opportunities to learn necessary skills needed in media careers: the French for Business elective, creative writing club and student newspaper. In the sixth form, students recently enjoyed assisting the marketing team with filming a new video for the website.

Students interested in a media career at LPS Mayfair, Hybrid and Sixth are found work placements through parents and friends and encouraged to learn coding, programming and design literacy. For early enthusiasts, the school recommends GCSEs, A levels or T levels in media studies and English language or literature. Media, journalism and communications degrees are later options.

St Dunstan's supports media enthusiasts with a wide range of co-curricular activities offering opportunities for exploration and creativity. The school's podcast club introduces students to the unique nature of audio media. *The Staple*, its student-led literary magazine, is managed by a team of year 12 co-editors and showcases creative writing, reviews and commentary on arts and culture. Other creative spaces include a zine club, various film clubs, a content creators' club and the student-led Dead Poets Society, all of which provide platforms for students to express their ideas and engage with different media types.

'These initiatives sit alongside the academic rigour of the Stuart Curriculum,' says Helen Riddle, 'ensuring students are not only learning about media but participating in its creation. In doing so, they develop the confidence, discernment and creativity needed to thrive in a world where communication is evolving faster than ever.'

Strikingly, in 2023 and 2024, Hurtwood House students achieved the highest marks in the world in the Cambridge International Media Studies A Level. How does the school achieve this? Cosmo Jackson explains: 'We have a personalised approach, where students have a very significant role in identifying and researching the objects of study.'

'We want the students to develop a critical approach to understanding the digital world they inhabit, and we believe this is best served by studying material that is as contemporary as possible, mostly from the past 12 months. The students also have freedom to create media they are interested in, which has the additional benefit of encouraging them to produce a diverse range of products every year.'

Trusting students with their own ideas around media while teaching them the skills to analyse those beliefs to a high level could be the answer to all our worries about the rapid growth of fake news. The future may just be brighter and safer than we could imagine. ■



Toni Tasic, media studies teacher at London Park Schools, with a student

