

## Infotainment Society: Junk Food News and News Abuse for 2008/2009

By Mickey Huff and Frances A. Capell

*We can do the innuendo  
We can dance and sing  
When it's said and done  
We haven't told you a thing  
We all know that crap is king  
Give us dirty laundry!*  
Don Henley, *Dirty Laundry*, 1982

The late New York University media scholar Neil Postman once said about America, “We are the best entertained least informed society in the world.” Since the mid 1980s, Project Censored has examined this phenomenon in the culture of the 24/7-television news cycle. Looking beyond what the corporate news media undercover or ignore, Project Censored surveys what they *do* spend precious airtime and column inches on while not covering the top censored stories or others in the public interest. Which news stories have been found consistently by such surveys in this so-called information age? “Junk Food News,” said Project Censored founder Dr. Carl Jensen. “It’s like a Twinkie, not very nourishing for the consumer.” This is how Jensen described it back in 1984 when he first began looking at how tabloid sensationalism had inundated the nightly news with the “Where’s the Beef” campaign. Jensen still considers Junk Food News a major problem in journalism and corporate media, particularly on today’s cable and television news. In that tradition, Project Censored “celebrates” the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Junk Food News this year.<sup>1</sup>

From Jessica Simpson’s weight and Brangelina’s escapades, to Britney Spears’ sister and the Obama’s First Puppy promise, the public is force-fed tripe. Americans are treated to a steady “news” diet of useless information laden with personal anecdotes or scandals, gossip, and flat out kitsch. Topics and in-depth reports that matter little to anyone in any meaningful way are given incredible amounts of media coverage. Even when relevant stories are covered, they often easily morph into News Abuse, stories that twist and turn into stranger tales divorced from their original newsworthy criteria. From Octomom and Joe the Plumber, to Barack Obama’s “blackness” and inability to bowl, real yet otherwise brief stories take long detours into living rooms and stay like unwanted guests for far too long and in far too great detail.

In recent years, this has only become more obvious. For instance, CNN’s coverage of celebrity Anna Nicole Smith’s untimely death in early 2007 is arguably one of the most egregious examples of Junk Food and News Abuse stories of the past few years. The magnitude of corporate media attention paid to Smith’s death were clearly out of synch with the coverage the story deserved, which was a simple passing mention, if that, on the entertainment portion of scheduled programming. Instead, CNN broadcast “breaking” stories of Smith’s death uninterrupted, without commercials, for almost two hours, with commentary by lead anchors and journalists. This marked among the longest uninterrupted “news” broadcasts at CNN since the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Anna Nicole Smith and 9/11 are now strange bedfellows, milestone bookends of corporate news culture. While news outlets were obsessing over Smith’s death, most big media giants were missing a far more important story. The US ambassador to Iraq apparently misplaced \$12 billion in shrink-wrapped one hundred dollar bills that were flown to Baghdad. This garnered little attention due to the media’s morbid infatuation with Smith’s passing. This is clearly news judgment gone terribly awry if not an outright retreat from journalistic standards.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that CNN was not alone. Corporate rivals MSNBC and FOX struggled to keep up with the Smith saga. This is what the self-proclaimed fair and balanced most trusted names in news had to offer. Meanwhile, billions of taxpayer dollars went missing and wars raged on in Iraq and Afghanistan, American troops and Iraqi civilians died, torture went unquestioned, habeas corpus was suspended with little fanfare, and the subprime crisis loomed (while then President Bush claimed the “fundamentals of our economy are strong”). These stories were nowhere on the intellectually barren corporate media landscape. The once trivial and absurd are now mainstreamed as “news.” More young people turn to late night comics’ fake news to learn the truth or tune out to so-called reality shows often scripted as Roman Holiday spectacles

of the surreal. Welcome to the Infotainment Society: American Media in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Here are the Top Ten Junk Food News Stories for 2008 and 2009 as chosen by Project Censored students and the online community via <http://projectcensored.org>:

1. Olympic Medalist Michael Phelps Hits a Bong
2. Jessica Simpson Gains Weight
3. First Lady Michelle Obama's Fashion Sense
4. The Brangelina Twins
5. Lindsay Lohan Dating a Woman
6. The Presidential First Puppy
7. Heidi Montag "Marries" Spencer Pratt
8. Barry Bonds Steroid Trial
9. Jamie-Lynn Spears Gives Birth
10. The Woes of Amy Winehouse

1) The British tabloid *News of the World* published an exclusive photo of Olympic gold medalist Michael Phelps smoking marijuana from a bong on Sunday, February 1, 2009, with the headline, "What a Dope." The picture was allegedly taken during a November house party while Phelps was visiting the University of South Carolina. The incident occurred nearly three months after the swimmer won eight gold medals for America at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, China. "He grabbed the bong and a lighter and knew exactly what to do," a witness recounted of Phelps in the *News of the World* report. Phelps quickly apologized to the public for his "regrettable behavior" and was suspended for three months by USA Swimming despite having never tested positive for banned substances during competition. In the weeks following, Phelps lost his sponsorship from Kellogg's cereal. That wasn't the only loss. Police confiscated the bong after the owner was discovered trying to sell it on eBay for \$100,000. In 1998, Olympic snowboarder Ross Rebagliati and Olympic swimmer Gary Hall Jr. found themselves amid controversy after testing positive for marijuana. "It's one of those substances that every year there's debate over it," said David Howman, executive director of the World Anti-Doping Agency.

Instead of having a serious dialogue about drug use and policy in the US, the corporate media focused on celebrity scandal. Rather than report on the record numbers of nonviolent marijuana possession arrests in 2008 (close to one million), the press write about college-age, jock party bong stories. There would have likely been no story at all if these were pictures of Phelps drinking a beer or even dragging on a cigarette (nor would it be a story if it wasn't a celebrity hitting the bong). Ironically, Phelps has won the most gold medals to date of any Olympic swimmer for the US. Perhaps this sends the wrong message to the public: even champions may sip of the weed. At least the incident implies that recreational pot use may not deter significant accomplishments. It was certainly a missed opportunity for media to moderate a national debate on marijuana policy, but this was not the only vital story the media missed that week.

The same week the public was doused with discussion of the murky bong water of Phelps' party mistake and the chlorinated pool water of his many victories, a report on the dangerous effects of global climate change on California's coastal waters went virtually unnoticed. The windier than usual conditions believed by some scientists to be a result of climate change drive more upwelling of nutrient-rich deep ocean waters. At normal levels, this upwelling sustains the abundance of marine life, but too much of these rich waters lead to a boom-and-bust cycle that ultimately creates ocean "dead zones" with little or no oxygen. Marine life that can't swim or scuttle away from these lethal zones will suffocate. Spurred by the discovery of such zones off the Oregon coast, UC Santa Cruz earth scientist Mark Snyder ran a climate simulation of the region's estimated climate from 2038 to 2070. The results showed a 40 percent increase from current wind speeds; increases of as much as 2 meters per second. "It was just chance they found the dead zones in Oregon," stated Snyder. Alarmed by a massive number of dead and dying crabs found in their traps, Oregon fishermen had contacted marine scientists. "It's quite possible these areas could be off the California coast," he said. Corporate media made ample time to discuss the woes of Phelps, but not an environmental shift that threatens marine life and those that rely upon it.<sup>3</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than Michael Phelps and the bong:

– Published on Sunday, February 1, 2009, by *Agence France Presse*

Israel Vows 'Disproportionate' Strike on Hamas

– Published on Sunday, February 1, 2009, by *The Guardian/UK*

Gaza Desperately Short of Food After Israel Destroys Farmland

Officials warn of 'destruction of all means of life' after the three-week conflict leaves agriculture in the region in ruins

– Published on Monday, February 2, 2009, by *Inter Press Service*

Generals Seek to Reverse Obama Withdrawal Decision

2) Photos of Jessica Simpson performing at a Florida Chili Cook-off looking a bit heavier than usual surfaced during the week of January 26, 2009. The purportedly unflattering shots of a curvier looking Simpson in an outfit that included “a muffin-top-inducing leopard belt” immediately made news headlines. Was she pregnant? Was she picking up eating habits from her NFL star boyfriend? Or was she simply hungry for publicity? Her sister, Ashlee Simpson-Wentz, and ex-husband, Nick Lachey, as well as seemingly unrelated celebrities such as Kim Kardashian were eager to weigh in on the subject. During a pre-Super Bowl interview, even President Obama quipped that Simpson was “in a weight battle apparently.” One would think the leader of the free world would have more important things upon which to comment.

While Americans were concerned with what was going into Jessica Simpson’s mouth, a “High Level Meeting on Food Security for All” convened by the United Nations and Spanish government was taking place in Madrid, Spain, to address the problem of one billion people suffering from hunger worldwide. During the two-day meeting, participants, including representatives from national governments, civil society, trade unions, the private sector, academia, multilateral organizations and donor agencies from approximately 100 countries expressed “the urgent need to strive even harder to achieve international commitments of increasing substantially financial resources and official development aid (ODA), particularly in relation to nutrition, food, agriculture and hunger-related program and policies.” No concrete resolutions were adopted, but the final declaration of the conference urged governments and international institutions to make good on previous pledges of aid and, on a positive note, called to eliminate “competition-distorting subsidies, in order to stimulate and conduct agricultural trade in a fair way.” Given that roughly 30,000 people around the globe die each day due to starvation, the media could spend more time on substantive issues surrounding food in lieu of the societal implications of Simpson’s body mass index fluctuations.<sup>4</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than Jessica Simpson’s weight:

– Published on Monday, January 26, 2009, by *Agence France Presse*

Study: Global Warming Effects to Last 1,000 Years

– Published on Tuesday, January 27, 2009, by the *Independent/UK*

Why Would a Banker Sell his \$14m House to his Wife for \$100?

Former Lehman boss accused of trying to hide assets from creditors

– Published on Wednesday, January 28, 2009, by *Inter Press Service*

Is Gates Undermining Another Opening to Iran?

3) The corporate media were all abuzz over President Barack Obama’s inauguration parties. In particular, the outfit the new First Lady Michelle Obama wore drew significant attention. Coverage of this historical event in American politics somehow looked more like a copy and paste job from a style column on celebrity fashion at the Academy Awards than the election of America’s first African American President. “Barack Obama may have talked about hope in his inaugural address,” stated a report from *The Baltimore Sun*, “but first lady Michelle Obama, wore it, quite literally, on her sleeve.” Choice descriptive phrases such as “optimistic hue” and “change you can wear” epitomized the blurring of a line between meaningful commentary and useless fodder when the spotlight was on Michelle Obama. Regardless of her many prior

achievements, she was now accoutrement to the President, a First Lady with flare for nontraditional fashion.

Despite the media's hyperfocus on the fashion sense of America's new First Lady, they failed to report a serious story concerning women's health in a Wisconsin prison. Two days after the inauguration ball, the ACLU filed a motion in federal court seeking to halt the Taycheedah Correctional Institution system from ordering and administering medication to prisoners. Taycheedah Correctional Institution is the largest women's prison in Wisconsin. According to the motion the prison often forces women to wait weeks for medicine, and when the medicine does arrive it is often the wrong medicine in the wrong doses. Prison guards with no medical training also administered medications. This has led to prisoner's receiving medications intended for other prisoners with different ailments. The motion charges that prison officials have known about these problems with medical care, yet they have failed to do anything to correct them.<sup>5</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than First Lady fashion:

– Published on Tuesday, January 20, 2009, by the *Times Online (UK)*

Ban Ki-Moon Lambasts Shelling of UN in Gaza

– Published on Wednesday, January 21, 2009, by *The Toronto Star*

Tar Sands Smog Seen Worsening

– Published on Thursday, January 22, 2009, by *The Guardian/UK*

US Accused of Killing 25 Afghan Civilians in Raid on Militants

4) Hollywood power couple Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt welcomed two new members to their ever-growing family on Saturday, July 12, 2008. That evening, Angelina gave birth to Knox Leon, a boy, and Vivienne Marcheline, a girl, at the Fondation Lenval hospital in Nice, France. The twins marked the fifth and sixth children for the couple. The following day, Mayor Christian Estrosi of Nice presented one of the birth certificates of the newborns on the steps of hospital, and stated, "It's a pride to Nice and all its citizens."

While these are fine sentiments of well wishes, this celebrity affair is not news. If the US media had been so inclined to keep the public informed of all the newsworthy happenings in southern France that weekend, perhaps they could have reported another story. The day before the birth of the Brangelina twins, in Lyon—a popular tourist destination less than 300 miles away from Nice—authorities ordered the temporary closure of Tricastin, a nuclear treatment plant, after a uranium leak polluted the local water supply. Residents in the region were told not to drink water or eat fish from nearby rivers since the leak, in which 165 pounds of untreated liquid uranium spilled into the ground. Swimming and water sports were prohibited, as was irrigation of crops with the contaminated water. France's ASN nuclear safety authority cited a "series of faults and human negligence that is not acceptable" when it ordered the closure following an inspection at the plant later that week.<sup>6</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than Brangelina:

– Published on Sunday, July 13, 2008, by *The Toledo Blade*

Community Gardens: Growing Food Brings People Together

– Published on Sunday, July 13, 2008, by *The Times Herald-Record (New York)*

Is Your Picnic Filled With 'Franken-Foods'?

– Published on Tuesday, July 15, 2008, by *Inter Press Service*

Israel Targets Hamas Orphanages

5) On Monday, September 22, 2008, the syndicated radio talk show "Loveline," featured Lindsay Lohan, who confirmed what had already been widely speculated: her romantic relationship with female DJ Samantha Ronson. "You guys, you and Samantha, have been going out for how long now?" DJ Ted Stryker inquired. "Like two years, one year, five months, two months?"

"For a very long time," Lohan remarked after laughing. Though the pair had made public appearances and had been photographed together, the interview marked the first time that Lohan would publicly comment

on the extent of their relationship. In the months after verification, the trials and tribulations of their tumultuous affair were to be covered extensively by the international news media. As of this writing, the comings and goings of Lohan and Ronson remain a staple among headlines.

While the spotlight shone on the aforementioned couple's happenings and whereabouts, little attention was given to the alarming fact that a group of American citizens were being denied their rights of going anywhere outside US borders. During the same week that Lilo and SamRo claimed their official couple status, Roberto Levato of *New American Media* broke a key story. Persons of Mexican descent were being subjected to unreasonable and arbitrary demands to prove that they were citizens of the United States before getting a passport. US citizens living on and around the U.S.-Mexico border are plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit alleging that, by denying them passports, the U.S. State Department is engaging in racial discrimination. Plaintiffs say that the U.S. government is denying them passports because they are persons of Mexican and Latino descent whose births were assisted by parteras, or midwives. One plaintiff, Texas native David Hernandez, a decorated US Army veteran says, "We were all born here. We're all citizens. The only difference is that we're Hispanic, we grew up poor and we happened not to be born in a hospital. My mother had to pay a partera \$40 instead." ACLU attorneys for the plaintiffs say they have documented a systematic pattern of racial discrimination among hundreds, perhaps thousands of US citizens of Mexican descent. Lovato states, according to the ACLU's Robin Goldfaden, "that although midwifery is a long-held tradition among whites, blacks and others living in Appalachia, Texas and other parts of the United States where hospital-assisted birth is unaffordable or unavailable, the denial of passports is only taking place among people of Mexican descent living along the southern border."<sup>7</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than Lilo and SamRo:

– Published on Sunday, September 28, 2008, by *The Guardian/UK*

Why Are Mothers Still Dying in Childbirth?

More than 500,000 women die in pregnancy or childbirth every year in the developing world due to lack of proper care, report Rebecca Seal and Katrina Manson.

– Published on Monday, September 29, 2008, by *American News Project*

The End of Free-Market Fundamentalism?

But is it really? And where is American capitalism headed?

– Published on Tuesday, September 30, 2008, by *Inter Press Service*

Bush Had No Plan to Catch Bin Laden after 9/11

6) November 5, 2008, was the day after an historic election where the American people voted the first African American, Barack Obama, into the nation's highest office. It had been a particularly long campaign season, starting a full two years before Election Day. Yet after two years of almost constant campaigning there was one story corporate media felt should be the focus of post election coverage: the imminent arrival of the new First Puppy. The new puppy had been a topic of discussion since early summer, but the coverage fervor spiked right after the election. Coverage primarily focused on what breed the Obama family would choose and whether or not the dog would come from a shelter. Rampant speculation among media elites ensued.

While Americans were checking boxes in online polls about which dog breed they felt the Obama's should adopt, reports of an American air strike of an Afghan wedding party were at first overlooked, then distorted and disputed by US government officials and the press. This US air strike killed numerous Afghans, mostly women and children. Afghan leaders estimated that up to 90 civilians died in the attack and American military leaders, which at first denied these facts, later downplayed the losses saying only 33 civilians were killed. Further, this has not been the only Afghan wedding hit by a US air strike. Rather than delve into the significance of the Afghan deaths and the plight of everyday people in the war torn country, the corporate media lamented how the strikes affected Afghan public opinion of America's presence there, thus creating a strategic hurdle for war planners. For the Pentagon and their corporate media stenographers, the air strikes were a PR problem, not a war crime or humanitarian nightmare. This is classic News Abuse.

It is true that US air strikes, especially those that kill innocent civilians, do little to encourage a

favorable view of US policy in the region. However, to Afghans, this is a serious, ongoing problem, not a PR blunder. The significance of the great loss of Afghan civilian lives was a subject that, in comparison, received a mere sliver of the coverage corporate media devoted to distorting the outcome of the attacks or the introduction of one canine life into the American Presidential family. In this case, both Junk Food News and News Abuse produce a one-two punch that knocks out any chance of a legitimate debate about US war policy or international law in Afghanistan. Acquisition of the First Pup, however, is one campaign promise Obama has kept, along with his pledge to increase US military presence in Afghanistan, thus ensuring more violence in this already devastated country.<sup>8</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than the First Puppy:

– Published on Wednesday, November 5, 2008, by *Inter Press Service*

Massive Iraqi Death Toll Ignored by Tabloid Culture

– Published on Thursday, November 6, 2008, by *Inter Press Service*

For Peace, The US Will Have to Change

– Published on Friday, November 7, 2008, by *Inter Press Service*

Coca Cultivation Up Despite Six Years of Plan Colombia

7) On November 20, 2008, Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag—the reality TV couple whose on-off relationship has been chronicled by MTV’s show “The Hills”—tied the knot near Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, after sipping margaritas on the beach. In an unprecedented feat, the ubiquitous couple known as “Speidi” managed to don the cover of *Us Weekly* magazine featuring a photo spread of the ceremony while simultaneously being described in other articles as having “quietly eloped.” The couple also publicly acknowledged that their wedding was not legally binding. Upon hearing news of the elopement, Heidi’s father, Bill, remarked, “then we just have to have another wedding here!” It would, indeed, be out of character for the couple—whose lives consist of a string of endless publicity stunts—to opt for only one media spectacle of a wedding.

Not everyone was making light of the institution of marriage during that same week in late November. Quite to the contrary, on Tuesday, November 24, the chief of a California state commission that enforces election law launched an investigation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints regarding alleged violations in the Proposition 8 campaign. The Fair Political Practices Commission notified the Mormon church that it would investigate a claim that the church did not disclose the value of non-monetary campaign activities, including alleged phone bank operations from Utah and Idaho that targeted California voters. The complaint was filed November 13, by Fred Karger, an activist who opposed the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage approved by 52 percent of voters on Election Day. Karger, a former political consultant who helped organize boycotts against “Yes on 8” donors, said he learned about the operations from reports in local newspapers. “Once you go out of the church membership and contact voters, that becomes a non-monetary contribution” that must be reported to the state, Karger said. Media concentration on a staged celebrity elopement unfortunately overshadowed possible election fraud that might have had a profound impact on thousands of real California couples hoping for equal rights.<sup>9</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than Speidi:

– Published on Thursday, November 20, 2008, by *The Baltimore Sun*

Police Spied on Activists Through '07

Protest groups say they haven't gotten the full story from state

– Published on Friday, November 21, 2008, by *One World.net*

Economy Hitting Women Hardest, Say Experts

– Published on Friday, November 21, 2008, by *Times Online/UK*

National Intelligence Council Report: Sun Setting on The American Century

8) On Monday, March 2, 2009, jury selection was expected to begin in the trial of the San Francisco Giants' Barry Bonds. The number one home-run hitter in baseball history was charged with 10 counts of perjury, stemming from the 2003 testimony that he had never knowingly used performance-enhancing drugs. Prosecutors elected to appeal U.S. District Court Judge Susan Illston's ruling that the positive steroid tests and other key evidence were inadmissible in the proceedings, after Bonds' former trainer, Greg Anderson, refused to testify. The prosecutors contended that the evidence, including alleged failed steroid tests, doping calendars and drug ledgers seized from the home of Anderson, proves that Bonds knowingly used steroids and then lied about before it a federal grand jury during the 2003 Bay Area Laboratory Co-Operative (BALCO) trial. Legal proceedings won't resume until July, at the earliest.

The very same Monday that Americans—bombarded by media coverage of the Bonds case—were awaiting the determination of his fate, the Supreme Court ruled in three separate cases of a far more somber nature. The Justices offered no remarks on their move to reject appeals of American and Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange in favor of Dow Chemical, Monsanto and other companies that made the toxic chemical defoliant and other herbicides used by the military in Vietnam. Although Agent Orange has been linked to cancer, diabetes and birth defects among Vietnamese soldiers and civilians and American veterans, the court said companies are shielded from lawsuits brought by U.S. military veterans or their relatives because the law protects government contractors in certain circumstances who provide defective products. The news media's ongoing interest in Bonds' case shows their commitment to infotainment. Apparently, America's favorite pastime trumps high court rulings that leave victims, particularly veterans, in the dugout while corporations keep hitting legal home runs.<sup>10</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than Barry Bonds:

– Published on Monday, March 2, 2009, by *The Guardian/UK*

CIA Admits to Destroying More Interrogation Videos

Bush scandal resuscitated as pressure builds for Obama to support an investigation into the CIA's detention practices

– Published on Monday, March 2, 2009, by *Gourmet*

The Price of Tomatoes: Keeping Slavery Alive in Florida

If you have eaten a tomato this winter, chances are very good that it was picked by a person who lives in virtual slavery

– Published on Thursday, March 5, 2009, by *Inter Press Service*

Military Dominance in Mideast Proven a Costly Myth

9) Following in the footsteps of older sister Britney, Jamie-Lynn Spears is making a repeat appearance on this year's list. The pregnancy of Jamie-Lynn Spears was the second place Junk Food News story last year, and the arrival of her daughter, Maddie Briann, lands at number nine this year. She gave birth to the baby girl on the morning of June 19, 2008, at a south Mississippi hospital, according to a friend of the Spears family, who disclosed the details to The Associated Press and asked not to be identified because the family had not yet announced the baby's birth. In addition to being the younger sister of Britney, Jamie-Lynn is also famous for her starring role on "Zoey 101", a Nickelodeon sitcom about prep school friends. The network issued a statement about the birth, saying, "We wish her and her family well." Nickelodeon spokeswoman Marianne Romano said that filming of the fourth and final season of "Zoey 101" was completed the summer before Spears became pregnant.

During the same week, UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) released a report about the increasing number of refugees worldwide. "Much of the increase in refugees in 2007 was a result of the volatile situation in Iraq," said the UNHCR in its annual survey of "Global Trends." Over 37 million people were living as refugees from conflict or persecution at the end of 2007, marking the second straight year of increases after a five-year decline. In Iraq alone, by 2008, there were close to 5 million refugees as a result of US occupation. "We are now faced with a complex mix of global challenges that could threaten even more forced displacement in the future," said the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres. "They range from multiple new conflict-related emergencies in world hotspots to bad governance, climate-induced

environmental degradation that increases competition for scarce resources, and extreme price hikes that have hit the poor the hardest and are generating instability in many places.”<sup>11</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance than the Spears’ family:

– Published on Thursday, June 19, 2008, by *The Washington Times*

Cheney Linked To Torture Tactics

– Published on Friday, June 20, 2008, by *The Toronto Star*

Sexual Violence 'a Tactic of War,' UN Council Says

– Published on Thursday, June 19, 2008, by *The Guardian/UK*

Welcome To 'The Disco': Music As Torture

10) “The doctors have told her if she goes back to smoking drugs it won’t just ruin her voice, it will kill her,” said Mitch Winehouse of his daughter, Amy, after she collapsed and was hospitalized June 16, 2008. It was also reported that the singer had early stage emphysema as a result of smoking crack cocaine and cigarettes, an irregular heartbeat, and would need an oxygen mask to breathe if she couldn’t stop. Her publicist later said Mitch had misspoken “out of his concern for her.” “She is not diagnosed with full-blown emphysema, but instead has early signs of what could lead to emphysema,” Tracey Miller, her U.S.-based representative, told The Associated Press. Winehouse, whose repertoire of hits includes an anthem vowing never to check into rehab, and who has also received treatment at a drug rehabilitation center, was reportedly covered in nicotine patches and has been “flourishing” in response to treatments. Mitch Winehouse appeared to be rather apologetic for misinforming the public in regards to the condition of his daughter.

However, an egregious lack of apology or any compensation for ex-detainees on behalf of the US government may have gone entirely unnoticed if it hadn’t been reported by Tom Lasseter in the McClatchy Newspapers two days after Ms. Winehouse’s collapse. To date, the U.S. government has not given any of the 38 former Guantanamo detainees—who have been found not to be enemy combatants by tribunal hearings—financial compensation, or apologized for wrongfully imprisoning them, shipping them around the world and holding them without legal recourse. In January, 2009, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit dismissed a case filed by four former Guantanamo detainees who alleged that their mistreatment amounted to physical torture and religious harassment. The appeals court decided that because the former detainees were foreigners who were detained outside sovereign U.S. territory at the time, “they did not fall with(in) the definition of ‘person.’” For the record, the US Constitution provides due process protections for any persons, regardless of citizenship. This has been a right in Anglo culture since the Magna Carta dating back to 1215.<sup>12</sup>

Here are a few other news stories that were not widely covered on television network and cable news during the same period which were of arguably more significance the woes of Winehouse:

– Published on Sunday, June 22, 2008, by *The Sunday Herald (Scotland)*

US Military Deny That New Prison Is Planned as 'Guantanamo Two'

Afghan-US relations hit by 'climate of distrust'

– Published on Sunday, June 22, 2008, by *Inter Press Service*

Women Leaders Ask Where Is Our Money

– Published on Monday, June 23, 2008, by *BBC News*

Protests Over Afghanistan Deaths

## News Abuse

While the News Abuse category may be confusing in relation to Junk Food News, one distinction is that News Abuse stories are about serious issues or are genuinely newsworthy items. However, the way they are presented in the corporate press has been misrepresented in terms of how the stories have been manipulated, trivialized, distorted, personalized, or more aptly, tabloidized. Stories about aging women’s

fertility, domestic abuse, and views of the working class are relevant. Murders and scientific tales of wonder are significant, but they are often turned into fodder for court jesters and circus acts by corporate media instead. In this past historic election year, in lieu of sober dialogue examining America's long held racial tensions, there were overblown stories judging the "blackness" of Barack Obama and how he symbolized the "end of racism" in America. Similar deductions were made with respect to Obama's poor bowling prowess, inferring that his inability to bowl a perfect game meant he was doomed to be an incapable leader, out of touch with the common voter. This was especially touted by the media's new electoral hero and spokesperson for the masses, Joe the Plumber. Too often important news topics are hijacked, trivialized, and made into hypothetical meta-critiques by the punditocracy. News Abuse stories are transformed from potentially newsworthy items into far more titillating yet irrelevant distractions as a result. Sadly, here are this year's News Abuse stories in detail.<sup>13</sup>

Top Five News Abuse Stories for 2008 and 2009:

- 1) Octomom
- 2) Chris Hits Rhianna
- 3) Joe the Plumber
- 4) Obama Can't Bowl: Out of Touch with Joe the Plumber
- 5) The Blackness of Obama

1) The number one abused story this year is the tale of Nadya Suleman, a 33 year old single unemployed woman who, through in-vitro fertilization, became pregnant with octuplets and gave birth to the second living set ever on February 26, 2009. Frequently referred to as "Octomom," Suleman was already mother to six children, all of whom were also conceived through IVF, before becoming pregnant with the octuplets. In the past, doctors have diagnosed Suleman—who has admittedly spent around \$100,000 on fertility treatments—with paranoia, depression, and post-traumatic stress syndrome. The mother of 14 children hasn't been employed since her first pregnancy, but has collected more than \$165,000 in disability payments according to workers compensation and medical records. She also receives disability payments for three of her six previous children. Apart from milking her newfound notoriety, Octomom's only current means of supporting her growing brood are student loans and a reported \$460 a month in food stamps.

America's fascination and disgust with the spectacle of Octomom is clearly exacerbated by a societal increase in budget-consciousness brought on by the recession. Funding for her down payment on a \$565,000, 2,583-square-foot house in La Habra, California, largely came from selling pictures of the children, and doing various interviews and appearances. In April 2009, Suleman filed for a federal trademark of the "Octomom" name. However, a Texas company not affiliated with her beat her to the punch and filed to trademark an "Octomom" game for the iPhone. Describing the forthcoming game, the company's CEO remarked, "You press on her belly and she has babies." Octomom has also signed a deal with Eyeworks, the third largest independent television producer in the world, for a new reality show, that at least for now, is not scheduled for American broadcast. The serial mother cunningly exploits the phenomenon of News Abuse, creating a surreal and nauseating publicity cycle. By watching them on television, or supporting them through limited government aid, it appears that one way or another the public will be doing its part to provide for the future of the Suleman children. Is this Octomom exploiting herself? Or is she just trying to jump on the bandwagon to take advantage of what the corporate media are doing to her anyway?

Instead of discussing the significance of fertility issues for couples, the fact that the US leads the industrialized world in infant mortality rates, growing economic hardships for single parents and children without healthcare, medical ethics, or that record numbers of women having planned and unnecessary cesarean sections, the corporate media feeds off one Octomom and her children. There are clearly more important things in need of media attention that affect the lives of many.<sup>14</sup>

2) On the evening of February 8, 2009, a fairytale-esque story of young love blossoming in the warm glow of the Hollywood spotlight turned, suddenly, into a chilling nightmare when a conflict between young pop stars Chris Brown, 19, and Rihanna, 21, turned physical. "I'm going to beat the . . . out of you when we get home! You wait and see," an infuriated Brown shouted at Rhianna, according a police affidavit. The assault had

occurred after a recording industry party in Beverly Hills. Though the incident was immediately all over the news, the shock-value (and thus coverage worthiness) of the story escalated when a photo of a post-encounter, bruised and battered Rihanna was leaked to the public. The assault caused Rihanna's "mouth to fill with blood and blood to splatter all over her clothing," wrote a detective at the scene. Brown, who was charged with two felonies, assault and criminal threats, faces a maximum of five years in prison if convicted.

Though subsequent public boycotts of Chris Brown's music and removal of his hits from radio airwaves in many places may have seemed appropriate, these things do not change the fact that the media egregiously abused this tragic tale of two young adults caught in unfortunate and painful circumstances (that have no doubt worsened exponentially in this climate of eagerness where the goal is to cover the most juicy and horrifying details of the incident.) Interestingly enough, hip hop star P. Diddy confirmed reports that he opened up one of his homes to Brown and Rihanna so the pair could "talk about a situation they're in," which only solidified the notion in the public eye that the lives of Hollywood celebrities are but a massive, interwoven soap opera destined to play out on televisions and newsstands. Further, rather than allowing the incident to generate a discussion on the problem of domestic violence, especially in the younger generation, the news coverage focused instead on the specific celebrity implications within the matter.

Taking the issue more seriously than most, Oprah Winfrey explored issues of domestic abuse with guest co-host Tyra Banks on a show dedicated to the topic on March 12, 2009. However, what kind of message does this send to the public? When a topic as rampant and problematic in America as domestic violence is only given considerable attention when a couple of celebrities are afflicted by it, that's not just domestic abuse; it's News Abuse.<sup>15</sup>

3) Something magnificent happened during the campaign season of 2008; the American dream was realized and its name was Joe the Plumber. Samuel "Joe" Wurzelbacher's notoriety came to him in October after he briefly debated taxes with President Barack Obama in his own front yard and footage was later aired repeatedly on television. The Democratic presidential candidate was doing some neighborhood campaigning in Toledo, Ohio, when confronted by Wurzelbacher, who asked him if he believed in the American dream. "I'm getting ready to buy a company that makes \$250,000 to \$280,000 a year," he inquired awkwardly, "your new tax plan is going to tax me more, isn't it?" Obama responded by telling Mr. Wurzelbacher that "spreading the wealth around" was always good. The phrase was quickly seized upon by the Republican opponent John McCain, conservative bloggers, and commentators as having revealed a desire to redistribute wealth (implying some type of socialism).

At the final presidential debate, Joe began as a walk-on part in McCain's story of how Obama's taxes would hurt small business owners. "Joe wants to buy the business that he has been in for all of these years, worked 10, 12 hours a day. And he wanted to buy the business but he looked at your tax plan and he saw that he was going to pay much higher taxes," McCain started off. "Joe was trying to realize the American dream." Joe's name came up around two dozen times during the 90-minute debate, including when the Republican nominee referred to him as "my old buddy, Joe the Plumber." After that night, Mr. Wurzelbacher was besieged with local and national news media, willingly granting interviews.

As it turned out, there wasn't much attention paid to who Joe actually was, nor to the average worker for that matter. Joe's real name was Samuel, he was not a licensed plumber, and with a reported income of \$40,000 a year, he was unlikely to be buying a company any time soon, so he would probably benefit from Mr. Obama's tax plans. Ironically, the United Association of Plumbers, Steamfitters, and Service Mechanics endorsed Barack Obama, as opposed to the Republican candidate backed by Joe the Plumber. Working class issues and union workers were sidetracked by this scripted reality sideshow made ready for primetime.

Since the election, Joe has kept himself pretty busy. Wurzelbacher's book, *Joe the Plumber: Fighting for the American Dream*, that addresses his ideas about American values, is now available for purchase. He also covered Israel's side of its offensive in Gaza (in case the US press wasn't already doing that enough) as a correspondent for the conservative website <http://pjtv.com>. Although foreign reporters usually need to provide proof of experience to receive government authorization to report from Israel, Wurzelbacher was escorted on his first reporting gig ever by the head of the Government Press Office, and a press office photographer. He also hired a publicity team and continues making appearances, including one at an Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms party in Colorado themed "Enjoy Your Freedoms While You Still Have Them." Meanwhile, looking at a real working class concern, workers at places like GM are hoping to enjoy their jobs

and pensions, while they still have them.

It was the campaign season for Joes in 2008, from Joe the Plumber, who has said that when Obama showed up in his neighborhood he'd just been tossing the football with his son, to Joe "Lunch Pail" Biden, to Sarah Palin's Joe Six-pack. These attempts to conjure up an image that seems in touch with the "Average Joe" are hardly a new occurrence dating back to the presidency of Andrew Jackson and the so-called era of the Common Man. Successfully resonating with those who identify as just chasing after that simple American dream can be extremely helpful, especially for members of the elite who have so little in common with the majority of Americans. And what, in Joe the Plumber's words, does this dream include? "A house, a dog, a couple rifles, a bass boat." Perhaps a book deal, a press pass, and national celebrity as well. While seeming to know a lot about what's up with Joe the Plumber, Americans are still waiting to learn more about the plight of workers and what can be done to improve the lives of millions of hard working people.<sup>16</sup>

4) As part of a new emphasis on a more laid-back, face-to-face style of campaigning during his six-day bus tour of Pennsylvania, Barack Obama made a stop at Pleasant Valley Lanes in the town of Altoona on March 29, 2008. It was there that Obama kicked off a notorious round of bowling with a gutter ball, and ended it with a total score of 37 out of 300. "My economic plan is better than my bowling," he told fellow bowlers. "It has to be," one onlooker called out. However, in the following weeks, the amount of news coverage allotted to said economic plan paled in comparison to the fateful game of bowling in Altoona.

A fixation on Obama's ill-conceived attempt to connect with blue-collar residents of central Pennsylvania quickly became apparent throughout newspapers, magazines, the Internet, and TV, particularly on MSNBC. "You know, this cuts to 'is this person real? Do they connect with me as a voter?' You know, for someone who's in a bowling league in northeast central Pennsylvania, in Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, they can't identify with someone getting a 37 over seven frames," Reuters Washington correspondent Jon Decker declared on an April 14 edition of *MSNBC Live*. During the April 1 edition of MSNBC's *Hardball*, host Chris Matthews asked Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO): "Let me ask you about how he—how's he connect with regular people? Does he? Or does he only appeal to people who come from the African-American community and from the people who have college or advanced degrees?" Matthews' comment on the previous day's edition of *Hardball*, was even more unconscionable: "This gets very ethnic, but the fact that he's good at basketball doesn't surprise anybody, but the fact that he's that terrible at bowling does make you wonder." Wonder about what in terms of governing a country? Perhaps the wealthy, privileged Matthews should have spent more time talking with working people for whom he claimed to speak.

On the March 31 edition of MSNBC's Morning Joe, host Joe Scarborough called Obama's bowling performance "dainty," saying to co-host Willie Geist, "You know Willie, the thing is, Americans want their president, if it's a man, to be a real man. You get 150, you're a man, or a good woman." Geist replied, "Out of my president, I want a 150, at least." Everyone who could belittle Obama with a jab at his poor bowling performance did so; from opponent Hilary Clinton, who joked at a press conference on April Fool's day, "I am challenging Senator Obama to a bowl-off," to a 10-year-old girl with a more impressive scorecard than the presidential candidate. In an April 2 article spotlighting her on NYDailyNews.com, Fourth grader Gabriella Llamas of New Jersey offered some words of wisdom, "You have to look at the pins when you throw it."

Almost a full year later, Obama appeared on *The Tonight Show* to tout his economic plan and told Leno that he had been practicing in the White House bowling alley and scored an unimpressive 129. "It's like—it was like Special Olympics or something," the president said, inciting laughter from the audience. With little relevance to the majority of society, the topic of Obama's Bowl-O-Rama once again became "news." Not only was the president's joke a perpetuation of a cruel stereotype, Special Olympians said, it was factually incorrect as well. One of the nation's top Special Olympics bowlers, Kolan McConiughey stated, "He bowled a 129. I bowl a 300. I could beat that score easily."

In this case of News Abuse, Obama's opportunity to resonate with working-class voters through his economic policies was eclipsed by his recreational shortcomings. Precious airtime spent on his inability to bowl could easily have been spent analyzing labor policies, rising unemployment, or average consumer debt. Instead, the public got News Abuse. Is anyone caught in the midst of this story-run-amuck going to put it into perspective? "Being a good bowler," said young Gabriella Llamas, "doesn't make you a good President." Maybe. Or maybe she just hasn't been watching enough *Hardball*.<sup>17</sup>

5) In February of 2007, *Time Magazine* trumpeted the following headline question, “Is Obama Black Enough?” Had anyone asked whether Bush or Clinton were white enough? Or black enough, for that matter? No. But with a biracial man that identifies as African-American, the corporate press couldn’t contain its intrigue: is he Huey Newton or Uncle Tom? Was he *really* black, as an Associate Press piece wondered with inclusion of commentator Christopher Hitchens stating, “We do not have our first black president,” He is not black. He is as black as he is white.” Never mind what Obama himself said on the topic, “I identify as African-American . . . that’s how I’m treated and that’s how I’m viewed. I’m proud of it.” Thereafter ensued a raging debate in the nation’s newspapers and cable shows: was Obama black, and if so, was he black enough? Other opportunities to discuss America’s sordid history of slavery and racial tensions took a backseat.

Among the most absurd displays of concern with Obama’s ethnic identification was on MSNBC’s *Tucker*, with conservative host Tucker Carlson leading a discussion of Obama’s blackness with an all white panel of journalists. All mused about how certain demographics would identify with an ethnically nebulous Obama, without any evidence or expertise on the matter, let alone any personal experiences with racial identity politics for African-Americans. At one point in the segment, Carlson said Obama “could just as easily identify as white [but] if he made that decision, the left would jump on him.” Given that Obama identifies as African-American, it seems odd for anyone to suggest he could easily identify as something other than how he sees himself. Again, while all of this chatter persisted, looking at the racial divides in America’s past and present became less important somehow. The corporate press seemed far more interested in seeing how Obama stacked up to their own cultural stereotypes of African-Americans and proceeded to use that as a yardstick of his blackness. FAIR media analyst Janine Jackson noted in several instances, elated pundits claimed that a more moderate (and more white?) Obama was not Al Sharpton or Jesse Jackson (and that his wife, Michelle, was no Angela Davis). *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*’s Jim Wooten went so far as to say after Obama’s election, that it indicated, “the political system that discriminated and the people who designed it are dead and gone” and Jonah Goldberg at the *Chicago Tribune* declared the Obama election clearly indicated America was a cured society, one of new tolerance.

Not to be outdone, NBC’s Chris Matthews remarked, “No history of Jim Crow, no history of anger, no history of slavery . . . all the bad stuff in our history ain’t there with this guy.” Obama’s election somehow vanished history. Of course, some wanted to play race both ways. Offering no evidence, GOP head Michael Steele complained the media didn’t challenge Obama because he was black. Would that be the same media that was so interested in Obama’s blackness, or rather, his possible whiteness, or the same media that proclaimed race was a dead issue in America of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Perhaps these folks are not paying attention to life for many people of color in America. For many in the elite press corp, a “post-racial” America seemed around the corner, yet most attention went to speculating whether or not Obama would give fair treatment to whites. Meanwhile, many parts of the US didn’t get the “post-racial” memos printed in the corporate press and on cable television. Sociologist and Project Censored director Dr. Peter Phillips points out, citing a recent UCLA Civil Rights Report, “What is difficult for many whites to accept is that geographical/structural racism still serves as a significant barrier for many students of color. Whites often say racism is in the past, and we need not think about it today. Yet, inequality stares at us daily from the barrios, ghettos, and from behind prisons walls.” Phillips goes on to state, “Racial inequality remains in the US. People of color continue to experience high rates of poverty, significant unemployment, police profiling and repressive incarceration. School segregation is a continuing concern among race scholars as well.” In fact, school segregation on racial lines is heading back to the days before *Brown v. Board*, especially in the western US.

Only weeks before the unprecedented inauguration of an African-American President, the alleged ushering in of “post-racial” America, an all too commonly occurring tragedy should serve as a potent reminder of the racial divisions that still plague the US. This was the shooting to death by BART police of an unarmed, subdued, young African-American man named Oscar Grant in Oakland, CA. This incident clearly illustrates how it will take more than electing a black person into the White House to end institutionalized, racial violence. It will take more than hope to change course as a society and more than mere decrees from the punditocracy.

In conclusion, Phillips offers sage advice, “We are at a time in society when a majority of the

population has elected a Black president of the United States. This presidency is a hugely symbolic achievement for race relations in the US. We must not, however, ignore the continuing disadvantages for people of color and the resulting advantages gained by whites in our society. Institutional policies and segregation contribute to continuing inequalities that require ongoing review and discussion. Efforts against racism must continue if we are to truly attain the civil rights goal of equal opportunity for all.”<sup>18</sup>

In Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

*“Unless we change direction, we are likely to end up where we are headed.”*

–Chinese proverb

After reviewing the Junk Food News and News Abuse stories, one thing becomes clear. The notion that corporate media are somehow serving the public good with their selection of news is both a tragedy and farce. What they are providing are distractions and distortions that lead to a more uninformed, unaware, and unprepared electorate in a democratic society. Big media executives regularly tell Congress and the FCC they are only giving the public what the public wants. Yet, survey after survey shows that the public, while liking entertainment, prefer their news to only present the facts and then to show opposing views. The past two years at regional FCC hearings on deregulation, the public overwhelmingly said they wanted more diversity, more views, and more choices. Still, every year, Americans must remain idle as they watch another season of *American Idol* or America’s Toughest Sheriff on *Smile... You’re Under Arrest*. News and entertainment lines have been blurred to the point of a new genre where news is entertainment and entertainment becomes news: That’s Infotainment.

The US is not only increasingly a nation of obese people, but is on the verge of another phenomenon the equivalent of cultural and mental obesity. We are a nation awash in a sea of information yet we have a paucity of understanding. We are a country where over a quarter of the population know the names of all five members of the fictitious family from *The Simpsons* yet only one in a thousand can name all the rights protected under the first amendment to the US Constitution. The People rely on the News to tell them what’s going on. Instead, too often, We The People get news abused or left with junk. Journalistic values have been sold out to commercial interests and not even our core, national and constitutionally protected values are sacred. Garbage in, garbage out. Enough is enough. This Fourth Estate Sale is over. It’s time for media revolution.

In 1976, the same year as the founding of Project Censored, there was a film released called *Network*. The main character was a disillusioned television news anchor named Howard Beale. In the film, Beale gave his viewers real advice about media bias, propaganda, and output of useless and trivial information. He shouted, “I’m as mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore.” Thirty-three years later, let’s all scream it from the rooftops and post it to the blogosphere. It’s time to escape “mediacracy” and declare our mental independence from corporate “news,” which oft turns out not to be news at all.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed introduction of Junk Food News, see Carl Jensen. *Censored: The News That Didn’t Make the News- and Why* (Chapel Hill, NC: Shelburne Press, 1993, pp. 89-96, 1993). The Neil Postman quote is the general subject of his 1985 work titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. The “Twinkie” quote from Carl Jensen in this paragraph was from an e-mail conversation between Jensen and chapter author Mickey Huff and others on April 14, 2009. For Project Censored’s more detailed history of Junk Food

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News and the emerging category of News Abuse see Peter Phillips. *Censored 2001* (New York: Seven Stories Press, pp. 251-264, 2001). This is Project founder Carl Jensen's chapter "Junk Food News 1877-2000." Each book volume of *Censored* has had a chapter on Junk Food News since 1993 with the addition of the News Abuse category beginning in 2001. Jensen originally began looking into Junk Food News in 1984 after criticism that Project Censored was crying censorship when some journalists were saying it was merely a matter of news or editorial judgment. If that's the case, news and editorial judgment have been skewed to the trivial for some time as trend of Junk Food News continues to grow. That said, it is also the case that the major media do sometimes break important stories, i.e., they do not always fail the public. However, they do so often enough undercover or ignore important issues in the name of covering Junk Food News, that it is essential to monitor this and report on it to spread awareness. The press have Constitutionally protected rights to inform and hold those in power to account, regardless of ideology. If the corporate media can't do that, We the People will.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Phillips and Andrew Roth. *Censored 2008* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007, pp. 184-185). For reports about skewed corporate media coverage of Anna Nicole Smith's death see <http://thinkprogress.org/2007/02/09/anna-nicole-media-embarassment/> and <http://www.ryersonline.ca/blogs/83/Anna-Nicole-Smith-coverage-becoming-too-much.html>. For more on undercovered stories of the time, see the stories #1, #2 from *Censored 2008* and *Censored 2009* online at <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/category/y-2008/> and <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/category/y-2009/> respectively. President Bush's comment on the economy can be found here [http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2007/08/bush\\_fundamentals\\_of\\_our\\_econo.html](http://www.swamppolitics.com/news/politics/blog/2007/08/bush_fundamentals_of_our_econo.html).

<sup>3</sup> Georgina Dickenson, "14-times Olympic gold medal winner Michael Phelps caught with cannabis pipe," *News of the World*, February 1, 2009, online at <http://www.newsoftheworld.co.uk/news/150832/14-times-Olympic-gold-medal-winner-Michael-Phelps-caught-with-bong-cannabis-pipe.html>; "Phelps acknowledges photo of him smoking a bong," *FOXSports.com*, February 2nd, 2009, <http://msn.foxsports.com/other/story/9160136/Report:-Picture-shows-Phelps-using-bong>; "Michael Phelps escapes pot charges," *The Vancouver Sun*, February 16, 2009, <http://www.vancouversun.com/sports/Michael+Phelps+escapes+charges/1295645/story.html>; Suzanne Bohann, "Climate Change May Be Stoking Stronger Winds, Altered Oceans," *Contra Costa Times*, February 3, 2009, <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2009/02/03-5/>. On the record marijuana arrests see Peter Phillips and Andrew Roth. *Censored 2009* (New York: Seven Stories Press, pp. 99-103, 2008). Also, this Top 25 Censored Story from 2009 is archived at <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/20-marijuana-arrests-set-new-record/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Please Stop Calling Jessica Simpson Fat," [http://www.nbcbayarea.com/around\\_town/the\\_scene/Stop-Calling-Jessica-Simpson-Fat.html](http://www.nbcbayarea.com/around_town/the_scene/Stop-Calling-Jessica-Simpson-Fat.html), February 6, 2009; "Jessica Simpson Shocks Fans with Noticeably Fuller Figure," *FOXNews*, January 27, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,483204,00.html>; Marcus Baram, "Obama Talks Football, Troop Withdrawal, Malia and Sasha's School, and Jessica Simpson," *Huffington Post*, February 1, 2009, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/01/obama-talks-football-troop\\_n\\_162971.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/02/01/obama-talks-football-troop_n_162971.html); "Call for New Focus on Food Security Ahead of Madrid Meeting," January 26, 2009, <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2009/01/26-3/>. For more on global starvation, see Peter Phillips' "Global Starvation Ignored by American Policy Elites," September 10, 2008, at <http://www.projectcensored.org/articles/story/global-starvation-ignored-by-american-policy-elites/>.

<sup>5</sup> Jill Rosen, "Michelle Obama's golden ensemble symbolizes hope," *The Baltimore Sun*, January 20, 2009, <http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/news/bal-lifestyle-dress0120,0,6505702.story>; Booth Moore, "Michelle Obama's style: Change you can wear," *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/jan/21/nation/na-inaug-fashion21>; "ACLU Says Failure to Properly Administer Medicines at Wisconsin Prison puts Women's Lives at Risk," *ACLU*, January 23, 2009, <http://www.commondreams.org/newswire/2009/01/23-9/>.

<sup>6</sup> Dana Kennedy and Kristin Boehm, "The Jolie-Pitts Welcome a Son and Daughter," *People*, July 13, 2008, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20203411,00.html>; Peter Mikelbank and Pete Norman,

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<sup>7</sup> "Lindsay Lohan Confirms She is Dating a Woman," *FOXNews*, September 29, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,426845,00.html>; Roberto Lovato, "Passports Denied: Mexican Americans Can't Travel," *New American Media*, September 22, 2008, [http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view\\_article.html?article\\_id=a35e8db592e30dd7c7f2fc84b654a104/](http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=a35e8db592e30dd7c7f2fc84b654a104/).

<sup>8</sup> "Obama Family Ponders First Pup," *NPR*, November 6, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96713926>; Bill Graveland, "Airstrike Kills 90 in Afghan Wedding Party," *The Toronto Star*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.thestar.com/News/World/article/530904/>. For more on the News Abuse of the US air strikes story, see Peter Hart in *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting's* journal, *Extra!*, June 2009, "Treating Civilian Deaths as a 'Sore Point.' The PR war in Afghanistan and Pakistan," p. 6. Online at <http://fair.org>.

<sup>9</sup> Lorena Blas, "Montag and Pratt head for the hills and elope," *USA Today*, November 24, 2008, [http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2008-11-24-montag-pratt-hills-elope\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2008-11-24-montag-pratt-hills-elope_N.htm); Kristin Boehm, "Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt Elope," *People*, November 24, 2008, <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20242388,00.html>; Mike Swift, "State officials to Investigate Mormon Church's Prop. 8 Activities," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 26, 2008, <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2008/11/26-2/>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Starr, "The Steroids Trial of the Century," *Newsweek*, February 26, 2009, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/186723>; "Bonds' Trial Delayed Until at least July," *National Post*, March 2nd, 2009, <http://www.nationalpost.com/related/topics/story.html?id=1345765>; "No Justice for Victims of Agent Orange," *Associated Press*, March 2, 2009, <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2009/03/02-11/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Jamie Lynn Spears gives birth to Baby Girl," *Associated Press*, June 19, 2008, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25264328/>; Jazmine Rodriguez, "37 Million Refugees in Spotlight This Week," *One World.net*, June 20, 2008, <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/06/20/9761/>. For more on Iraqi refugees resulting from US occupation, see the #1 story from *Censored 2009* online at <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/1-over-one-million-iraqi-deaths-caused-by-us-occupation/>, particularly the reporting of independent journalist, Dahr Jamail.

<sup>12</sup> Gil Kaufman, "Amy Winehouse Diagnosed with Emphysema, Singer's Father Says," *MTV.com*, June 23, 2008, [http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1589756/20080623/winehouse\\_amy.jhtml](http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1589756/20080623/winehouse_amy.jhtml); "Spokeswoman: Amy Winehouse Doesn't Have Emphysema," *Associated Press*, June 23, 2008, <http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/WireStory?id=5225321&page=1>; Tom Lasseter, "Day 4: U.S. hasn't apologized to or compensated ex-detainees," *McClatchy Newspapers*, June 18, 2008, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/homepage/story/38885.html/>. For more on suspension of Habeas Corpus and the media, see *Censored 2008*, story #1 at <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/1-no-habeas-corporus-for-any-person/>.

<sup>13</sup> New Abuse became a category after 2001, seen in the 2003 annual *Censored* volume and beyond.

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