



TEACHING GUIDE

Project Censored's

State of the Free Press 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Engaging Students with the Power of News

As the United States grapples with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the nation's living legacy of systemic racism, and partisan threats to the foundations of democracy, the integrity of news has never been more important.

State of the Free Press 2022 provides a wealth of resources for promoting students' understanding of journalism's crucial role in U.S. society. This guide suggests some ways that teachers can use *State of the Free Press 2022* to help students:

- understand the significance of news media,
- evaluate the scope of press freedom in the United States, and
- appreciate media activism as an opportunity for community engagement and social responsibility.

Applying tools of critical media literacy that Project Censored has pioneered and championed since its founding in 1976, *State of the Free Press 2022* shows students how to distinguish trustworthy journalism from slanted news and clickbait infotainment. Balancing critical analysis with optimistic vision, *State of the Free Press 2022* advances remedies for a more robust free press and provides inspiring models for grassroots engagement.

HANDS-ON NEWS ANALYSIS

Who and What Count as “Newsworthy”?

At the heart of *State of the Free Press 2022* is the Project’s annual listing of the year’s most important but underreported news stories. This year’s Top 25 stories highlight a range of important social problems, including the climate crisis, institutional racism, economic inequality, public health, and the power of people organizing together to create positive social change. The succinct story summaries and analyses—originally researched by college students participating in Project Censored’s Campus Affiliates Program—provide engaging introductions to these issues for students who may not otherwise know much about them.

Beyond each Top 25 story’s importance in its own right, this chapter of *State of the Free Press 2022* can be used to encourage students to consider why stories such as these often fail to receive the widespread news coverage and public attention that they deserve.

Discussion topics:

When journalists report news, they transform events into stories. Those news stories then encourage audiences to see the world in one way—and not in other ways.

- What makes an event newsworthy?
- How do news stories focus our attention on some issues, but not others?

A truly free press informs the public about competing ideas and conflicting viewpoints. Censorship threatens press freedom by restricting the available range of ideas and viewpoints. Considering the stories featured in Chapter 1 of *State of the Free Press 2022*, answer these questions:

- How would you evaluate the state of journalism in the United States?
- Is it strong, because challenging stories like these have been covered by independent news organizations?
- Or is the state of the free press limited, because most so-called mainstream news organizations either ignored or marginalized these important story topics?
- Do these differences in coverage reflect competing definitions of what and who count as “newsworthy”?

Junk Food News

Project Censored uses the term “Junk Food News” to explain how profit-driven corporate news outlets often peddle cheaply produced, soft-serve “news” stories focused on celebrityhood, the latest trend, and other cultural meringue in place of the nutrients provided by substantive investigative journalism.

Chapter 3 of *State of the Free Press 2022* examines how celebrity “humilitainment”—entertainment at the expense of others’ misfortunes—often features as junk food news, overshadowing reporting on more consequential topics such the wave of female unemployment propelled by COVID-19, legislation to restrict voting rights, and humanitarian crises in Yemen and Ethiopia.

Discussion topic: “Junk Food News” is a metaphor. What is “junk food”? How might some kinds of news affect our minds the way junk food affects our bodies? Introduce and discuss some examples of “Junk Food News,” from Chapter 3 and from today’s news. What sort of news do we need to be nourished, as citizens and as communities?

Online resource: [Project Censored the Movie: Ending the Reign of Junk Food News](#), a 63-minute documentary film, features media experts, activists, and students on junk food news and how to counter its negative effects.

News Abuse

Corporate news spin goes beyond “junk food” news, to include what Project Censored analyzes as “News Abuse”—truly important news topics whose significance is nonetheless distorted by how the story is framed. Focused on cases of news abuse, in Chapter 4, Robin Andersen shows how one form of media bias—false balance—distorted establishment news coverage of some of 2020–2021’s most significant stories, including the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests spurred by the police killing of George Floyd, claims by Donald Trump and his supporters that Democrats “stole” the 2020 presidential election, and Republican efforts to restrict voting rights.

Online resource: Prepare students to identify examples of News Abuse on their own by using lessons from Eliot D. Cohen’s “[Digging Deeper: Politico-Corporate Media Manipulation, Critical Thinking, and Democracy](#).” Cohen’s article, available from Project Censored’s website, introduces six basic guidelines for assessing the validity of media claims and provides concrete examples of how to use them in examining actual news stories.

EXPLORATION

Classroom Activities that Promote Students' Direct Engagement

1) **Patterns in story coverage.** Ask students to examine the list of the Top 25 news stories featured in Chapter 1. Are there themes (e.g., health, environment, activism) that connect two or more stories on the list? Have students describe how these stories are connected.

Digging deeper: Based on identified story themes, discuss reasons why independent news media might cover story topics in ways that corporate news media do not.

2) **Evaluate the Top 25.** Ask students to discuss which the stories featured in Chapter 1 are the most important or most eye-opening and why. Which story would they have ranked as #1 on the list if they were a Project Censored judge? What argument would they make in support of that ranking? Were there stories on the Top 25 list that should not have been included, either because they have received adequate corporate news coverage or because they are not socially or politically significant?

3) **Media ownership.** Ask students to consider how media ownership might affect news content. Do we need a diversity of media owners in order to assure a diversity of media content?

Media ownership is crucial to distinguishing between corporate and independent news outlets. Select several news outlets and have students use online research tools to determine who owns the outlet and to assess whether it ought to be considered a corporate news outlet or not.

- See the Project Censored website for an [extensive list of independent news outlets](#).
- *The Columbia Journalism Review* maintains a searchable database—[Who Owns What?](#)—that is useful for investigating the consolidation of media ownership in the hands of just a few major corporations.

4) **Scrutinize the advertising.** Advertising drives a lifestyle of consumption premised on market relationships and a global economy. Understanding the broader role that advertisements play in shaping our culture, the environment, and the globe is crucial if we are going to make informed decisions about what to buy (or not) and, ultimately, how we want to live.

Give students the opportunity to engage in a systematic analysis of how advertisements attempt to persuade us. The following exercise is adapted from Robin Andersen's "Commodifying the Public Sphere through Advertising and Commercial Media," included in [The Global Critical Media Literacy Project Educators' Resource Guide](#), which is available as a free download from the Global Critical Media Literacy Project's website (gcml.org).

Decoding advertising messages: How do advertisements create meaning?

- What emotion, desire, anxiety, or sense of well-being is associated with the product?
- What promise is being made about the commodity?
- Can the product fulfill the promise in the advertising message? Are the promises misleading or contradictory?
- What are the negative social effects of such messages? Are they demeaning to specific groups of people?
- What are the harmful environmental and social effects of the product's manufacture, packaging, and distribution?

5) **Journalism as detective work.** In “Looking for Clues” (from Chapter 5, “Media Democracy in Action”) Rachael Jolley, an expert on censorship who teaches journalism in the UK, explains how she encourages budding journalists to hone their skills of detection as they investigate clues and construct cases. Using Jolley’s brief article as a guide, you can help students think about how journalists, like detectives, look for clues, shadow and surveil, and undertake investigative research in order to do their jobs.

6) **Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model.** In *Manufacturing Consent*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argued that news is “filtered” to exclude stories, people, and perspectives that threaten the interests of established power and money. Their propaganda model identified ownership, advertising, source selection, flak, and fear as five filters that lead to slanted news coverage and censorship. After familiarizing students with Herman and Chomsky’s five filters, have them pick one or more stories featured in the Top 25 story list from Chapter 1 of *State of the Free Press 2022*. Does the propaganda model help to explain why corporate news outlets have failed to cover that story?

For a brief overview of Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model, see Andy Lee Roth’s “Breaking the Corporate News Frame: Project Censored’s Networked News Commons,” included in [The Global Critical Media Literacy Project Educators’ Resource Guide](#).

7) **Who makes the news? Tracking authorized news sources.** Sources are the people and organizations that journalists rely on to develop news stories. Journalists tend to seek sources deemed to be authoritative or important; at the same time, being quoted as a source bestows authority on individuals or organizations, a process that sociologist William Gamson analyzes in terms of “media standing.”

Working individually or in groups, have students select a news story and track every instance in that story where a person or document is quoted directly. Students can track who gets quoted in terms of different aspects of identity (for example, occupation and gender). After sharing their findings, the class as a whole can assess whether the sources quoted reflect a diverse range of perspectives on the topic or not.

One starting point would be to track the quoted sources from one or more of the stories featured in the book's Top 25 story list (Chapter 1). This examination can be deepened by comparing and contrasting quoted sources from independent and corporate news coverage on a given news topic. Are there differences in the patterns of who's quoted?

For one example of this type of analysis, focused on independent and corporate news coverage of LGBTQ+ issues, see Avram Anderson and Andy Lee Roth, "[Stonewalled: Establishment Media's Silence on the Trump Administration's Crusade against LGBTQ People](#)," from the Project Censored website.

8) Validating independent news stories. Project Censored's Validated Independent News (VINS) exercise engages students in research of potentially under-reported news stories, providing them with hands-on opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills and their critical media literacy. For this exercise, students (1) identify an independent news story on an issue of interest to them, (2) research the story, including tracking back to the story's original sources and investigating the extent to which the story has received corporate news coverage, and (3) summarize the story, providing a succinct, easily-read version that also assesses whether or not the story has been adequately covered by the establishment press.

In addition to its direct utility as a way to engage students' critical thinking skills, the assignment also provides students the chance to share their findings with a wider public, online via Project Censored's [Validated Independent News](#) feature, and in print as part of the Project's annual book series. (Note that each Top 25 story featured in *State of the Free Press 2022* includes credit to the student researcher and faculty evaluator who vetted that story.)

Complete details about the VINS exercise—including a [prompt for students](#) and a [guide for teachers](#)—can be found on the Project's website (projectcensored.org).

Supplementary materials on the VINS exercise—including sample grading rubrics and a chapter-length article that provides a complete curriculum for the assignment—are included in [The Global Critical Media Literacy Project Educators' Resource Guide](#).

Project Censored: Online all-year

Beyond *State of the Free Press 2022*, Project Censored’s website provides free access to a wealth of content relevant to educators and their students. From the latest investigative journalism to a complete history of the Project’s famed Top 25 story lists, the site features guidelines for how to engage students in researching [Validated Independent News](#) stories as part of the Project’s Campus Affiliates Program.

The Project’s [weekly radio show](#), which features expert guests analyzing current media topics, can be streamed online via the website, including past programs dating back to 2010. The website is also a portal for [United States of Distraction: Fighting the Fake News Invasion](#), a 65-minute documentary filmed and produced in 2020 by Project Censored students. Overall, the website is an outstanding classroom resource for sharpening students’ critical media literacy skills while learning about independent media inaction today. For more information, visit www.projectcensored.org.

Project Censored’s *State of the Free Press 2022* prepares students to [flex their media literacy muscles](#) in service of a more equitable, just, and inclusive society.

TEACHER AND STUDENT TESTIMONIALS

“The VINS project is an invaluable part of my courses for its fostering of student-centered intellectual and practical skills development. Students learn valuable research and writing skills while expanding their knowledge of news and information sources through hands-on work. With the opportunity to have their work published on both the Project Censored website and in the annual Censored yearbook, students see how their work matters and has impact beyond the walls of the classroom.”—**Allison Butler, Media Literacy Certificate Director, Communication, University of Massachusetts, Amherst**

“Project Censored provides my undergraduates with a hands-on real world journalism project focused on contemporary issues of vital civilizational import, with invaluable support from the Project Censored network of professional colleagues around North America.”—**Rob Williams, Education and Human Studies, Champlain College; co-editor, *Media Education for a Digital Generation***

“From discovering new, independent news sources and deciding on important underreported issues, to researching and writing concise yet in-depth summaries. Project Censored is a transformative experience for students in more ways than one. Ultimately, they’re empowered as media users, citizens, and students to seek out different sources and advocate for issues, and they’re proud to contribute to something bigger.” —**Helen K. Ho, Communications Studies, Saint Mary’s College**

“Students find Project Censored’s learning content both engaging and empowering. I would be hard-pressed to identify better critical news literacy learning content for my students.” —**Nolan Higdon, Media Studies and History, CSU-East Bay and UC Santa Cruz; author of *The Anatomy of Fake News***

“After interning for Project Censored for the last three years, I can safely say my media literacy has soared and made me far more critical of the sources easily at my disposal. I’ve started reading far more independent news and have been able to educate my friends on being more open to other sources and not just corporate media. Working on multiple books helped me with my research skills. I’m grateful for the opportunities I’ve been given through Project Censored and will continue to contribute for as long as I can.” —**Sierra Kaul, Diablo Valley College and University of California, Davis**

“As a student, Project Censored has given me the unique opportunity to apply my knowledge of media literacy beyond a classroom setting. Because Project Censored underscores first-hand student involvement with independent news stories, it has modified my engagement with journalism to incorporate a variety of independent news organizations that report on pressing issues ignored by the hollow mainstream media.” —**Cem Addemir, North Central College**

PRAISE FOR Project Censored’s *State of the Free Press 2022* and Project Censored

“Project Censored does critical work highlighting stories of incredible importance.”
—**Trevor Timm, executive director, Freedom of the Press Foundation**

“*State of the Free Press 2022* is a must read for all those who value a free and open society. I wish this book was not so relevant. But unfortunately, it is.”—**Alan MacLeod, journalist, editor of *Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent***

“Like ideology itself, censorship has its strongest hold on us when it has convinced us that it isn’t there at all, when the lies or half-truths peddled to us by disinformation merchants—or the algorithmically curated versions of reality we’re allowed to see—leave us yearning for nothing more and, like a warm blanket, wrap us in the idle comfort of not knowing what we don’t know. As their yearly editions always do, Project Censored’s *State of the Free Press 2022* does the vital work of helping us know—and, ultimately, demand better of—our world.” —**Maximillian Alvarez, editor-in-chief, The Real News Network**

“What nuts-and-bolts journalism looks like: Honest. Unflinching. Well documented.”
—**Aaron Delwiche, professor of communication at Trinity University, editor of PropagandaCritic.com**

“Project Censored has shined the light for more than forty years on those critical stories and investigative reports that government officials, major media companies, and assorted gatekeepers of ‘respectable’ journalism too often ignore.” —**Juan González, *Democracy Now!* co-host and journalism and media studies professor at Rutgers University**