I do not mean to imply that television news deliberately aims to deprive Americans of a coherent, contextual understanding of their world. I mean to say that when news is packaged as entertainment, that is the inevitable result. And in saying that the television news show entertains but does not inform, I am saying something far more serious than that we are being deprived of authentic information. I am saying we are losing our sense of what it means to be well informed.

lic Discourse in the Age of Show Business. In the book, Postman perhaps unwittingly yet presciently warned about what has grown to become our current bread and circus sideshow, made-for-reality TV faux news culture—comprised of deleterious distractions and distortions that produce dazed, disgruntled, and dismayed civic dilettantes in delirious denial about key issues of our time, about where we are heading as a society, and the eventual decline of American civilization.

Since the 1980s, Project Censored has covered the growing and now normalized trend of Junk Food News, which Jensen began analyzing after news editors took umbrage at his critiques of the failures and possible censorship concerns related to the so-called “mainstream” press dating back to 1976. They claimed his cries of censorship were too harsh, that they had to use news judgment when deciding what to report.

Jensen thought that was a fair response. Therefore, during the early 1980s, he focused more on what the news media were covering, rather than what they may have been left out or censored. What he discovered was that the major news media were in fact systematically failing to report important stories to the public, not because they didn’t have time, but because they exercised poor news judgment. They chose infotainment. This is especially the case on TV (to which well over half of Americans still turn for news, as we’ll note in a moment). The fixation on the inane and titillating over the relevant and substantive has grown to dominate news coverage so much so, that this entire volume could be an expanded version of this chapter—chock-full of example after example.

These problems have not completely escaped public notice. The American public seems to be aware there is a problem with the news, but to mixed degrees. A recent Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism’s study, State of the News Media 2013, sheds some light on the news media landscape. On one hand, the number of Americans who do not trust the major news sources, especially on TV, has risen. Interestingly, at the same time, these same news outlets, especially on cable, are broadcasting more and more opinion journalism, not straight, factual reporting. MSNBC leads the way with an astonishing 85 percent of its airtime filled with opinion programming, with Fox and CNN trailing, but CNN was the only network of the three to have slightly more news reporting than opinion (54 to 46
percent). These studies suggest a possible factor in why nearly one-third of American news consumers are tuning out—they are not getting the quality of hard news in the quantity they once did.\textsuperscript{6}

With a slightly different focus, another study by Public Policy Polling (PPP) found that among American voters, “there’s only one source more Americans trust than distrust: PBS,” in which 52 percent reported their trust.\textsuperscript{7} This included all major TV network and cable news outlets. Furthermore, another Pew poll from 2011 found that “fully 66% say news stories often are inaccurate, 77% think that news organizations tend to favor one side, and 80% say news organizations are often influenced by powerful people and organizations.”\textsuperscript{8} Despite these figures, well over half of Americans still listed TV news as their main news source, and most claimed that while they distrusted news sources in general, the ones that they chose to view were somehow more accurate, exempt from their related broader criticism (as pointed out in the PPP study above).\textsuperscript{9}

That said, it should be hard to ignore the link between Junk Food News and News Abuse and the erosion of public trust in news media. Our purpose is not to dwell on this problem, but to call attention to it in an intelligent and clever way, and to show readers not only how corporate news media are entertaining rather than informing us, but also how corporate media could be devoting time to covering issues published by independent news sources. In other words, the very type of news story Project Censored highlights in its Top 25 each year could be reported instead of the faux news of celebrity births and deaths, fad dances, and the outcomes of popular shows like American Idol or The Voice. We can be well informed by our news, or we can be well entertained. The choice is ours. We should choose wisely.

**JUNK FOOD NEWS**\textsuperscript{10}

*When a population becomes distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments, when serious public conversation becomes a form of baby-talk, when, in short, a people become an audience, and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture-death is a clear possibility.*

Junk Food News: The Next Generation

The arrival of celebrity babies once again led the corporate media to hand out imaginary cigars for the superfluous entertainment class. Kim Kardashian, Drew Barrymore, Kate Middleton, and Snooki added to the cacophony of inane and useless information by bearing the next generation of junk food news spawn. However, none gained more media attention than the future heir to the Royal throne. CBS News, *The Huffington Post*, and Fox News devoted their energies to speculating over possible baby names, even consulting baby naming “experts.” Internet traffic after news of the royal pregnancy crashed the royal couple’s website. The Junk Food News media frenzy even tragically led to the suicide of a nurse after shock jocks Mel Greig and Michael Christian of 2Day FM, masquerading as Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Charles, tricked her into divulging Kate Middleton’s treatment for morning sickness.

While the corporate media focused on celebrity births, the alternative media outlet Common Dreams reported that civilian deaths connected to terrorism are on the rise. Their account is based upon the findings of the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP), located at the University of Maryland. In its attempt to analyze the economic and social dimensions of terrorism in countries, the GTI found that the areas where the United States military has most actively engaged terrorists have experienced an increase in terrorist activity and civilian deaths. According to IEP founder and executive chairman Steve Killelea, “Iraq accounts for about a third of all terrorist deaths over the last decade, and Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan account for over 50 percent of fatalities.” Critics of the report argue that it contains a narrow definition of terrorism, and fails to include state-supported violence against civilians. The GTI report defines terrorism as the “threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.” However, linguist, political activist, and longtime critic of American foreign policy Noam Chomsky offered an alternative definition suggesting that the “wanton killing of innocent civilians is terrorism, not a war against terrorism.”
This is certainly a far more newsworthy topic for discussion, one we as free people ought to be having. Instead, we get celebrity birth reporting and related shenanigans around the clock, which literally are driving some people to death. That said, we likely won’t see purveyors of such junk food news up on terrorism charges any time soon.

Daze of Plunder

The corporate media love a messy celebrity split. This past year, Katy Perry and Russell Brand, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver, Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony, Justin Bieber and Selena Gomez, Al and Tipper Gore, and Kris Humphries and Kim Kardashian, ended their relationships. After five years of marriage, actor Tom Cruise and actress Katie Holmes divorced. Celebrity reporters and gossip columnists flooded the media with an overabundance of rumors and speculation to explain the breakup. Despite media speculation, Holmes did not publicly charge the couple’s religion—Scientology—as the cause of the divorce. Nevertheless, the media invented a bevy of stories in relation to the Cruise-Holmes split spanning over seven months that included “Katie’s Escape Plan,” Scientology’s influence on the couple’s child, the divorce settlement, or gossip over Cruise’s latest romantic exploits. Days of Thunder star Cruise couldn’t get a reprieve from the media storm.

While breakups dominated many corporate media headlines even outside of entertainment news programs, a story concerning the London Interbank Offered Rate (Libor), which impacts billions of consumers of financial products and taxpayers, went underreported. Among those bothering to cover the Libor scandal, instead of celebrity divorces, there is a consensus that the situation is the largest financial scandal of recent years. Libor refers to the interest rate for which international banks may borrow from one another. It has a direct effect upon the borrowing costs for a wide array of financial products, including home mortgages, car loans, credit cards, and student loans among others. Additionally, it sets prices on the derivative market, totaling over $750 trillion.

The scandal began when investigators discovered that banks were understating borrowing costs. This resulted in higher prices
for consumers and greater profits for banks. However, regulators at the Federal Reserve Bank and the Bank of England suspected the underreporting as early as 2007. In the end, the British banking giant Barclays settled for $450 million in a plea bargain with British and American authorities for their manipulation of Libor rates and the resignations of top bank officials, including the chief executive of Barclays, Robert E. Diamond. In an effort to recover costs to the city due to Libor manipulation, Baltimore, Maryland, has filed a lawsuit against sixteen banks, including Charles Schwab, Barclays, Royal Bank of Scotland Group, HSBC, Bank of America, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, UBS, and Deutsche Bank.

The corporate media presented some coverage via the Internet, but not much more at the time the scandal was really breaking (even though Bloomberg reported that Barclays announced LIBOR misstatements some four years earlier). Ben Dimiero and Rob Savillo of Media Matters for America reported that during the period between June 27 through July 12, 2012, television networks ABC, NBC, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC spent nearly ninety-one minutes reporting on the TomKat divorce, while the Libor scandal received only a miniscule twelve minutes of coverage. As Wall Street and Washington sloganeer that the banks are “too big to fail, too big to jail,” maybe we need some celebrity big bank breakups for financial scandals the magnitude of Libor to attract the big media attention they truly deserve.

“Kill the Gays Law?” Corporate Media Coverage Won’t Touch This!

South Korean songwriter, rapper, dancer, and producer Park Jae-Sang, or, as he is known on stage, “Psy,” became a junk news sensation over the past year. He is best known for his international hit song “Gangnam Style,” which became the most-watched video in the history of YouTube with nearly one trillion views. The video’s success even earned the singer a trip to the White House to meet President Obama. Corporate media–induced controversy struck Psy when health officials in England issued a warning to middle-aged men to avoid overexerting themselves, after a forty-six-year-old Psy fan with a heart condition collapsed while performing the equally popular signature dance that accompanies Psy’s hit song.
After the tragedy, the singer issued an apology to the family “for any pain caused.”

Corporate media pundits previously took offense to Psy’s 2004 performance of “Dear American,” which expressed criticism of the “war on terror” and the murder of two Korean schoolgirls by US artillery. Just as conservative media pundits had objected to the White House invitation extended by the Obama administration to rapper and poet Common, they also petitioned to bar the Korean rapper from performing there, prompting Psy to issue an apology for the nearly ten-year-old performance criticizing US actions. Despite the controversy, Psy became a media darling and performed with former rap/pop sensation MC Hammer at the American Music Awards. They performed Hammer’s 1990 mega-hit “U Can’t Touch This,” which dominated the airwaves and was part of the New Year’s celebration in New York’s Times Square.

While the corporate media fretted over Psy and celebrated the return of MC Hammer, Equality Matters reported that between October 31 and December 5, 2012, corporate news outlets CNN and Fox News devoted more time to “Gangnam Style” than the renewal of Uganda’s “Kill the Gays” law. The law bans intercourse with same-sex, underaged, or disabled persons, and allows the death penalty as punishment for offenders. The law found little attention in the American corporate press, but plenty of coverage in alternative and foreign media. Regarding the bill, Ugandan speaker of parliament Rebecca Kadaga said that the country had “no space for gays.” In a ghastly interpretation of the holiday spirit, she vowed to push the bill into law “as a Christmas gift.” For those looking for more egregiously open and hostile, murderously intolerant, in-your-face, homophobic policies by governments around the world—U Can’t Touch This (though sadly, there are several other countries trying).

**Triumph of the Swill: Sailing the Seas for Junk Food News**

The overabundance of corporate news media coverage surrounding a cruise ship that was stranded without power adrift in the Gulf of Mexico left many angry, shocked, and even . . . rudderless. The 102,000-ton Carnival Cruise ship, aptly named “Triumph,” lost power after an
engine room fire. There were no injuries reported from the 3,143 passengers and 1,086 crew members. The liner was ultimately towed by tugboat to Mobile, Alabama.

Corporate media outlets, and CNN in particular, offered in-depth and lengthy coverage of the inconveniences and less than luxurious conditions the passengers and crew endured. Most notably, they had to do without air conditioning, elevators, toilets, and kitchen equipment to prepare hot meals. The luxury liner was temporarily unable to provide fresh water. Passengers dealt with the privations by defecating in plastic bags, eating cold meals, and sleeping upon the deck of the ship. Sewage swill sloshed along Triumph’s hallways and passengers had to wait in long lines for meals. CNN provided a forum for passengers to recount their own personal horrors of the experience. CNN posted over fourteen stories and videos on their website and dedicated five reporters to the story. They even ran uninterrupted coverage, something previously reserved for events like 9/11. Understandably, CNN drew the ire of more serious reporters as well as The Daily Show’s Jon Stewart, who charged that the absurd amount of coverage was an attempt to boost the network’s sinking ratings. Maybe the joke was on Stewart as the endless (and mostly uneventful) coverage of the so-called “Cruise from Hell” doubled CNN’s rating for the week.

While passengers facing “first world problems” received an abundance of coverage, poor Americans found themselves shipwrecked. Compromises between the Obama administration and Republicans under the rubric of the Budget Control Act of 2011 received little coverage. The backroom agreement called for infinitesimal cuts in military spending while calling for a whopping $500 billion cut in domestic spending (which is about two-thirds of the Pentagon’s annual budget). The proposed cuts will lead to the loss of food stamps for an estimated 600,000 women and children; the loss of government-financed housing for some 100,000 formerly homeless people; the elimination of early education slots for as many as 70,000 poor children; the elimination of federal support for 7,200 school employees who serve special-needs children, and who inspect for job or food safety, forcing unpaid furloughs; and finally, the reduction by $500 million of federal loans to small businesses. There are plenty of real castaways in America who deserve our attention and concern, not the ones being towed on a luxu-
ry cruise liner, to the unblinking eyes and misplaced gasps of corporate media’s self-proclaimed “Most Trusted Name in News.”

**NEWS ABUSE**

*Most of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.*


Former Project Censored director Dr. Peter Phillips created the category of News Abuse over a decade ago. Phillips differentiated between Junk Food News, stating that News Abuse was distorted reporting about otherwise serious issues. Phillips suggested that many stories that ended up taking on the veneer of a Junk Food News story in fact began as legitimate topics for news coverage. The news media can lose sight of the original thesis of a story, miss or distort important facts that alter the meaning of a report, or give far too much attention to a story than the subject’s overall societal significance merits. What is lacking most often in News Abuse stories is a substantive topic or subject context and history. Because they address serious, newsworthy issues, News Abuse stories linger in the public mind, but in a skewed or erroneous form. News Abuse stories can also take a turn into the sensational, the irrelevant, the trivial, the mundane, or worse—they become a form of propaganda.

Phillips’s message was most underscored whenever news media coverage missed the point of newsworthy issues. This year, our examples include how Sesame Street again became part of our national political discourse as a major party candidate used a fictitious character to wage ideological conflict in an election. The election and candidate were clearly newsworthy, but the media’s focus on Big Bird rather than on more substantive issues in the election was News Abuse. And so it goes. From sex scandals in the CIA distracted from their arming the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan (and Syrian) opposition; Americans pleaded to save Twinkies (real junk food) instead of real people’s pensions and jobs—here are this year’s examples of News Abuse in action.
In 2012, PBS and *Sesame Street* found themselves in the conservative crosshairs yet again. During the electoral debates, Republican candidate Mitt Romney targeted Big Bird when he suggested the elimination of the subsidy to PBS as a means to reduce government spending. The statement caused a flurry of activity within social media as people attempted to rally support for Big Bird and PBS. The incident gathered even more momentum when mainstream media outlets reprinted a letter by eight-year-old Alabama resident Cecelia Crawford, who wrote: “When I grow up I’m going to get married and I want my kids to watch it so do not cut it off. . . . You find something else to cut off!” In response, media pundits suggested the letter was a forgery, while the Obama campaign capitalized on it by posting on the web: “Save Big Bird! Vote Democratic.”

While Big Bird and Sesame Street served as a bloody shirt to rally the respective Republican and Democratic bases, the corporate media became transfixed upon sex allegations surrounding Kevin Clash. Clash was the voice and puppeteer for Elmo on *Sesame Street*. He testified before congress as Elmo in support of children’s music programs. Clash, who is gay, was accused by a former lover of having sexual intercourse with him while he was a minor. The accuser ultimately recanted and the charges were deemed false. However, three additional accusations surfaced from former lovers seeking financial compensation. Clash’s accusers admitted that the sex was consensual, though they had been underage. They are currently seeking damages ranging from $75,000 to $5 million. The allegations ended Clash’s twenty-four-year run with *Sesame Street*.

The story became a corporate media distraction from stories that matter to a nation that claims to support democratic ideals. Conservatives argued that Clash was proof that the Democratic–supported PBS undermined “American Values.” News outlets such as *TMZ*, *Fox News*, *CBS News*, the *New York Daily News*, as well as the *Huffington Post*, immediately fixated upon the story. It was ranked by the *Huffington Post* as one of the top crime stories for 2012—although no criminal charges had actually been filed by the time of this writing.

Meanwhile, stories of environmental importance went unnoticed.
by the corporate media during the Elmo fire, but not in the alternative press. Independent media outlet Common Dreams reported that, in return for a waiver of future prosecution, British Petroleum (BP) agreed to pay $4.5 billion in fines and pled guilty to fourteen felony and misdemeanor charges as a result of the Deep Water Horizon oil rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. The “spill,” as it was erroneously dubbed by the corporate media, gushed 4.9 million barrels of oil into the Gulf over a three-month period (some argue even more, not to mention the damage of the chemical Corexit that was dumped to “clean up” the mess in violation of Environmental Protection Agency rules). The incident also killed eleven workers and has seriously damaged the Gulf region over the long term, impacting the thousands—and possibly millions—that relied on the Gulf to make a living, or were simply unfortunate enough to be living on the coast where toxins linger. The Department of Justice found the company guilty of one misdemeanor count under the Clean Water Act and another under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Finally, BP was found guilty of one felony count for obstruction of Congress for misleading Congress about the amount of oil that had surged into the Gulf.

Another story ignored during the Elmo fallout was the release of scientific findings that waters around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant continue to remain toxic. The water around the plant contains levels of caesium-137 at around 1,000 becquerels. Caesium-137 is a radioactive isotope commonly used in nuclear reactors and weaponry. It is a highly problematic and virulent substance because it is easily soluble in water. These findings were presented at the Fukushima Ocean Impacts Symposium at the University of Tokyo.

It’s too bad that, like Sesame Street, the corporate news is often literally brought to us by the letters B and P, as in BP, who like many in the oil and energy sector are major advertising clients (read: revenue source) for corporate media, which in turn played down BP’s role in the Gulf oil ecocide for which they were responsible. Corporate media also failed to emphasize that the amount BP was fined was actually less than the corporation’s profits for one quarter of one year. As for Fukushima—a lingering disaster that may have an epic and growing legacy as trouble still mounts—the corporate media in the US can’t be bothered. For most Americans, it’s Fuku who? They’ve moved on to the next distraction.
The year’s most widely covered sex scandal involved former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), General David Petraeus, and his biographer Paula Broadwell. As commander of forces in Iraq, supporters of General Petraeus, including the media, hailed him as an innovator and the “best general since Eisenhower.” (And yes, Petraeus was the head of a spy and secret-keeping agency and couldn’t keep a secret about his own affairs—maybe that is news after all.) Petraeus’s resignation came upon the heels of the September 11 and 12, 2012, attacks upon the American consulate and the CIA annex in Benghazi, Libya, in which four people were killed, including US Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens. According to noncorporate sources, Stevens was, in fact, the US liaison to the al-Qaeda-linked Libyan opposition. Moreover, Stevens allegedly facilitated the shipment of arms to the insurgents fighting against the government in Syria.

Media outlets reported that the affair was uncovered by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) while investigating complaints that Broadwell had sent threatening e-mails to socialite and military groupie Jill Kelley, whom she suspected of having an affair with Petraeus as well. Kelley, who has been dubbed “The Tampa Kardashian,” was also implicated in charges of sexual misconduct involving former Afghanistan commander General John Allen. In addition, there have been allegations that Broadwell attempted to gain access to Petraeus’s e-mails and may have been privy to other classified information. It appears as though Broadwell has confirmed these suspicions herself; during a speech at the University of Denver, she claimed that the attack upon the CIA annex was an attempt to rescue captured Libyan militia members.

At the outset of the September 11 and 12, 2012, attacks, the Obama administration stumbled to find explanations, falsely claiming that the attacks were a protest against an anti-Islamic video made in the United States and posted on the Internet; an explanation initially signed off on by Petraeus. Eventually, however, the Obama administration, the CIA, and Petraeus concluded that the attacks were indeed perpetrated by an element related to al-Qaeda. Republicans quickly seized upon the administration’s lies in an attempt to derail Obama’s
re-election campaign. Only later was it revealed that the attacks were carried out by Ansar al-Shariam, a militia group that is sympathetic to al-Qaeda, and allegedly materially funded by the United States.49

In a half-hearted effort to investigate the causes and failures surrounding the Benghazi attacks, the Accountability Review Board (ARB) issued a report that placed the preponderance of the blame upon the State Department for the security lapses that preceded the attacks upon the American consulate. National security officials failed to properly assess the escalation of violence and disorder in eastern Libya that witnessed “a string of assassinations, an attack upon a British envoy’s motorcade and the explosion of a bomb outside the American Mission.”50 The inquiry found that the State Department had relied too heavily upon inadequately trained personal and local militias. Moreover, the ARB report found that State Department officials had appallingly denied requests for more security by personnel stationed at the American Embassy in Tripoli.51 The report concluded by charging “systemic failures and leadership and management deficiencies at senior levels within . . .” the bureaus of Diplomatic Security and Near Eastern Affairs within the State Department, which led to a security environment “that was inadequate for Benghazi and grossly inadequate to deal with the attack that took place.”52 A critic of the ARB report, Ronda Hauben of Global Research, charged that it failed to shed light on the Benghazi attacks.53 First, she argued the division of the report into “classified” and “unclassified” versions could only serve to obfuscate any attempt to discover the truth. Second, the ARB report did not mention the CIA’s role, which she contended was “the crucial question that any legitimate investigation into the situation must explore.”54

The corporate press focused on the subsequent political firestorm surrounding Petraeus’s resignation, and thereby created a media environment that failed to cover the real story of the Benghazi attacks. Barry Grey of the World Socialist Web Site explained: “The attack on the US consulate and the CIA annex exposed the fact that Washington had financed and helped arm al-Qaeda–linked Islamist and jihadist forces in its bloody 2011 war to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi and install a more pliant regime.”55 The government and media cover-up of the CIA’s role in the Benghazi attacks has screened the agency’s
actions from the eyes of US citizens and the aided overthrow of sovereign leaders. This no doubt diminishes the standing of the United States in the global community and erodes fundamental American ideals. This is also further evidence of the scandal of manufacturing a scandal in order to distract from another scandal at work in Washington DC. One might also say this is obfuscation writ large.

While the “mainstream” corporate media inflated the Petraeus affair beyond all comprehension, avoiding more crucial issues at hand in Libya, it also ultimately obscured the ongoing and deplorable treatment of women in the military (see Censored story #16 in this volume), which has eventually found some coverage due to a congressional inquiry into allegations of sexual assault at Joint Base San Antonio–Lackland. The scandal has been labeled “the largest sex scandal in military history” and drew comparisons to the “Tail-hook Scandal.” As a result of an Air Force inquiry into the allegations, six instructors have been court martialed for adultery, rape, and conducting unprofessional relationships and nine others and are awaiting court martial. Moreover, the Air Force found thirty-two military training instructors allegedly engaged in inappropriate or coercive sexual relationships with fifty-nine recruits and airmen at Lackland. The Pentagon estimates that 19,000 cases of sexual assault occur each year with only a few thousand actually reported. Out of the incidents reported, only 200 resulted in court martial.56

A recent article by the Associated Press reported that 30 percent of military commanders who have lost their jobs in the last eight years have been due to various charges of sexual misconduct that range from harassment to adultery to improper relationships.57 News Abuse stories don’t only function as obfuscators regarding their own subject matter, they also can function as broader distractions from breaking news developments and revelations about other very important issues.

Corporate Media Ignore Worker Rights . . . Claim Twinkie Defense

Some notable celebrity deaths of the last year included Michael Clarke Duncan, Neil Armstrong, Phyllis Diller, Gore Vidal, Sherman Helmsley, Ernest Borgnine, and Andy Griffith. However, the corporate media demonstrated considerably more grief reporting
regarding the bankruptcy of Hostess and the subsequent loss of a beloved snack icon—the Twinkie. Television pundits on Good Morning America anticipated the “Chocodile” tears of millions of school children, and mourned while they stuffed their faces with their last memorial Twinkies. Jesse Thomas, a contributor to Forbes Magazine online, echoed similar sentiments, lamenting: “This announcement is a travesty for pre-packaged desserts and kindergarten lunch-boxes across America.”

Yet, not all media outlets grieve in the same fashion. Those with a pro-corporate bias such as Fox News (News Corp.) and ABC News (Disney) vented their rage at labor, suggesting that disputes between management and labor ultimately contributed to the company’s bankruptcy. Fox’s America’s Newsroom, and ABC News repeated statements issued by Hostess that placed “[blame upon] a worker’s strike for crippling their ability to make and deliver their products.” Some in the corporate media noted Hostess’s inability to adapt to a changing marketplace, yet did so with a hint of derision; though acknowledging that Americans have been attempting to be more conscious of the nutritional content of foods they eat, Forbes Magazine labeled the trend a “health food craze.” And the Huffington Post speculated that “even a repackaged Twinkie would be hard to sell to the current generation of health-obsessed parents.”

Preposterously, some angry bloggers bitterly remarked, “The Twinkie was Michelle Obama’s Osama bin laden,” in a thinly veiled jab at the first lady’s unveiling of the new United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) nutritional guide titled “My Plate.” Few in the corporate media reported that Hostess initially filed for bankruptcy in 2004. At that time, the company had cited “declining sales, high food costs, excess capacity and worker benefit expenses,” as contributing factors to its difficulties. In response, the company closed some bakeries and restructured union contracts; however, this did not mitigate the problem of its debt, which totaled nearly $800 million. Members of the Bakery, Confectionary, Tobacco Workers, and Grain Millers International Union, expressed little surprise (unlike those in the press) by the company’s second bankruptcy filing and even “accused the company of having ‘frittered away’ union concessions, wasting money on a corporate headquarters move, according to court papers.”
The Huffington Post reported that panic-stricken Hostess-philes desperately bought up remaining supplies of various Hostess products on eBay, while other more enterprising individuals sold cartons of unopened Twinkies as a vanishing piece of Americana for as much as five hundred dollars.\textsuperscript{64} As it turned out, the panic surrounding the Hostess bankruptcy and the beloved filling-stuffed polystyrene snack was premature. The judge hearing the bankruptcy proceeding urged both the union and Hostess into mediation, a measure that may yet lengthen the companies’ shelf life. Moreover, Hostess has claimed that several other companies have expressed interest in the brand.\textsuperscript{65}

While the corporate media offered coverage of overpaid television pundits stuffing their faces with Twinkies, poorly paid and mistreated Walmart employees attempted a strike against the world’s largest retailer. Employees at several locations including: Chicago, Milwaukee, Washington DC, Dallas, Los Angeles, Sacramento, San Francisco, and Seattle walked off the job for the first time in Walmart’s fifty-year history.\textsuperscript{66} While the strike has received coverage in the corporate press, there has been a noticeable bias toward covering the management’s perspective along with profits—all while the retailer logged record Black Friday sales.

According to their website, Walmart employs over two million employees in twenty-seven countries. Walmart has supported the unionization of its employees in foreign countries such as China, yet has fought unionization within the United States. In the past, Walmart’s relationships with its labor force have been strained, to say the least. Former abuses against employees have included violation of child labor laws, failure to pay back wages and overtime, and the employment of undocumented workers. Walmart has been the focus of many studies, books, and documentaries that have all attempted to expose the unethical business practices of the company as well as its negative impacts on communities. Walmart has attempted to silence the most recent push to hold the company accountable for its treatment of its employees. And, as outlined by Paddy Ryan on Daily Kos,

Walmart, one of the richest corporations in the world, refuses to pay its employees a livable wage or provide any form of decent healthcare, increasing reliance on government as-
sistance, and the need for a social safety net. . . . Walmart’s poverty wages force employees to rely on $2.66 billion in government help every year, or about $420,000 per store. In state after state, Walmart employees are the top recipients of Medicaid. As many as 80 percent of workers in Walmart stores use food stamps.67

Possibly further driving the ire of workers is the fact that Walmart’s CEO makes $16,826 an hour, while the typical Walmart worker makes $13,650 a year. But at least that’s not quite a full-blown two-to-one/year-to-hour wage ratio like in the late nineteenth century under the Rockefeller monopoly, so, it’s an obvious improvement for workers, right?68

The fight for unionization at Walmart is long-standing and complex. Lawyers for Walmart filed an injunction against the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW) in response to the striking workers. UFCW aided the creation of the 2010 Organization United for Respect at Walmart, or OUR Walmart. The fledgling organization has called for protests at one thousand Walmart stores during the Black Friday shopping weekend.69 Striking employees charge that the company not only manipulates hours and benefits, leading to low wages and part-time status, but they allege that it also discriminates against women and minorities. OUR Walmart filed a claim with the National Labor Relations Board “that Walmart’s human resources department violated the National Labor Relations Act by instructing store managers to threaten workers with termination and disciplinary actions if they participate in the strikes.”70 Nonetheless, in spite of the controversy it has generated, Walmart has been ranked by Forbes Magazine as the twenty-fourth most powerful brand. Its annual sales exceed over $450 billion.71

Corporate media has demonstrated a noticeable bias toward management in their coverage; Fox News questioned Walmart’s ability to control its striking workers. Moreover, Fox News expressed worry that this latest labor dispute (notice it isn’t referred to as a management dispute) would interrupt sales in what has become a traditional post-Thanksgiving rush for unnecessary consumer goods. Nonetheless, Fox praised Walmart for “taking on” unions and even ran a segment
sponsored by Walmart that defended the company against striking workers.\textsuperscript{72} Regardless of the publicity surrounding the desperate situation of Walmart employees, fewer than 1 percent of the company’s workforce participated in the strike. Unfortunately, very few shoppers were informed enough, or cared enough, to be able to stand up for impoverished workers and resist the lure of cheap consumer goods.\textsuperscript{73} Meanwhile, in the US, CEO pay and compensation packages can go as high as 1,795 to 1 compared to average workers at companies like J. C. Penney. Abercrombie and Fitch’s CEO made 1,640 to 1 compared to the average retail worker in the company. All of this indicates that there is some money to go around that could pay more wages and benefits, and could lead to more full-time employment, but the corporate media often fail to come to that conclusion.\textsuperscript{74}

With All Eyes on Marriage Equality, Monsanto Slips Under the Radar

Two same-sex marriage Supreme Court cases began on March 26, 2013. The first case was \textit{Hollingsworth v. Perry}, which challenges the constitutionality of California’s 2008 ballot initiative Proposition 8. Proposition 8 defines marriage to be between a man and a woman and does not allow same-sex couples to legally marry. Opponents of Proposition 8 argue it to be unconstitutional on the basis that it violates the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The next day, the Supreme Court heard arguments for \textit{United States v. Windsor}, disputing the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This case claims DOMA to be unconstitutional because it allows legally married same-sex couples to be treated differently under federal law than opposite-sex couples, such as denying them federal benefits.\textsuperscript{75} Both cases are very significant, have been a long time coming, and have the potential to be a big step towards equal rights for same-sex couples.

Coverage of these cases is key, and there has certainly been media coverage from most major news outlets. Many devoted extensive amounts of time to the court proceedings, including live coverage, numerous reports, and transcripts after the fact. However, with the time given to this issue, some reports deteriorated to News Abuse, including the usual partisan battles and “who just came out supporting/opposing gay marriage” focus. The \textit{Los Angeles Times} kept the
public up to date on the latest celebrity “tweeting” about the Supreme Court cases, while CNN chronicled the most interesting signs and costumes seen outside the courtroom.

With so much focus on the Proposition 8 and DOMA Supreme Court cases, little attention was given to President Obama signing spending bill HR 933, which included the “Monsanto Protection Act.” Hidden in the Agricultural Appropriations bill under the modest title of “Farmer Assurance Provision,” the Monsanto Protection Act “strips federal courts of the authority to immediately halt the planting and sale of genetically modified seed crops regardless of any consumer health concerns.” With neither certainty over the safety of genetically modified crops nor a labeling system in place, it is one more step backward for food safety and justice. And with the public’s eyes on the Supreme Court, directed by the corporate media’s infatuation with culture war issues, the act was hardly even noticed. While the public should be informed about marriage equality, they should be just as concerned about the quality and safety of the food they are eating, and about which big corporations are literally writing themselves into the law so they can be shielded from any future liability.

As Censored 2014 went to press, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled on DOMA, setting the stage for marital equality. While this is a major step forward for civil rights, people should also pay very close attention to the independent press to see what else may be missed, from the court’s rulings on voting rights and the US prosecution resting their case against Bradley Manning to the protests going on in Turkey and the military coup overthrowing the Morsi government in Egypt. Bait and switch is an old game, and the major news media should be able to cover more than just a few stories at a time in detail, with context and clarity, and for the betterment of the public.

(Lack of) Election Coverage 2012

The year 2012 marked the spectacle of another US presidential election season. Corporate media coverage of the entire election process was akin to political theater: dripping with pageantry, oozing with canned patriotism, lacking any real objectivity or critical perspective. All major news media outlets were on board to cover former Mas-
sachusetts governor and Republican candidate Mitt Romney, and current president and Democratic candidate Barack Obama throughout the campaign trail, cataloguing and remarking upon their every move, however irrelevant.

The country watched three presidential debates—which are controlled by a private corporation run by Democrats and Republicans, called the Commission on Presidential Debates—between the Republican and Democratic candidates only, along with one debate between the two vice presidential candidates, as they discussed topics including the economy, healthcare, and the role of the federal government, among others. While the public focused on coverage of two candidates arguing two sides of an official narrative, along the way providing entertainment with oddities from “Big Bird” to “binders full of women,” something very important was missing from their news reports on the 2012 election: actual democracy. So-called “mainstream” corporate media offered no coverage of third party presidential candidates, who were actually bringing forth many alternatives to the views espoused by the two major, corporate-backed, political party candidates.

While corporate media offered extensive coverage of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, only Democracy Now! and the Huffington Post provided any time to third party candidates during the 2012 presidential election. Democracy Now! aired “expanding the debate” segments for each of the presidential and vice presidential debates. These broadcasts showed each of the debates in real time and paused to allow third party candidates—such as Green Party candidate Jill Stein, Justice Party candidate Rocky Anderson, and Constitution Party candidate Virgil Goode—the same amount of time to answer the same questions. The Huffington Post offered similar coverage, giving Reform Party candidate Andre Barnett and Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson the opportunity to participate in the debate as well.

If there had been corporate media coverage of these third-party candidates during the debates, the public would have had a broader range of ideas to consider, and a more representative pool of candidates from which to choose. While Obama and Romney presented and argued about the exact same ideas for health care, both Jill Stein and Rocky Anderson criticized “insurance company care” and advocated for single-payer universal health care, which was totally absent from the presidential de-
Many of the third party candidates talked about ending all wars, bringing troops home now, and cutting the defense budget, instead of offering arbitrary timelines and refusing to cut from defense in the name of “national security.” They even addressed the emerging police state, with some candidates promoting the repeal of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) and the USA PATRIOT Act, following due process, and ending warrantless spying. With proper mainstream news coverage, the country could have been more informed about their actual choices beyond the two major party candidates.

*Democracy Now!* also reported on the secret debate contract for the 2012 election. This twenty-one-page document, drawn up by the Democratic and Republican candidates, excluded all third party candidates from the presidential debates, prohibited these two candidates from participating in any other debates, and restricted the moderator in the debates from asking any follow-up questions. In response to the exclusion, Green Party candidate Jill Stein and vice presidential candidate Cheri Honkala tried to simply gain access to one of the debates at Hofstra University and were arrested. They were then literally bound and tied in custody for eight hours. Yes, in the United States of America, land of the free, these official candidates on the national Green Party ticket for president and vice president, two women on the ballot in most states from a legally registered political party, were arrested trying to access a public debate at an institution of higher learning, and bound by authorities, like in a third world dictatorship. But hey, at least they weren’t shot, they were only tied up—this is America, after all. Of course, how this type of corporatist collusion with a police state can even exist let alone be tolerated in the US should be quite a mystery.

One would think this merited serious news coverage, even investigating. Not in America. Before being taken away, Dr. Stein offered a statement that encompassed the presidential elections of 2012: “This is what democracy looks like in the twenty-first century.” And a grim look it is at that.
Thatcher vs. Chávez: Celebrity Death Match of Political Grief Porn Propaganda

The first few months of 2013 saw the deaths of two significant global political figures. On March 5, 2013, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez died of cancer at the age of fifty-eight. Chávez held power for fourteen years in Venezuela, and was known for transforming the country through a socialist revolution. One month later, on April 8, 2013, former prime minister of Great Britain Margaret Thatcher died of a stroke at the age of eighty-seven. As Britain’s first female prime minister, Thatcher led the country for twelve years and ushered in a wave of capitalism heavily focused on Milton Friedman–inspired free market economics. Both were important and controversial leaders in their respective countries, and both of their deaths received substantial amounts of corporate media coverage in the US. Reports following their deaths showed a clear bias regarding their political legacies.

Americans love their grief porn, their infatuation with deaths of well-known people, and the fact that some celebrities are political figures sometimes even exaggerates attention. The deaths of Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston were certainly big news, and the deaths of Thatcher and Chávez also garnered considerable attention, but for different reasons.

Corporate news reports on the death of Margaret Thatcher tended to have a very positive view on her life and politics. For a leader considered to be controversial, there was no shortage of praise when it came to Thatcher’s time as prime minister. Hailed for being the “Iron Lady” and “uncompromising,” many news reports focused on her success in the financial sector of the country. By pushing for deregulation and privatization, the Wall Street Journal stated she “helped turn London from an increasingly obsolete financial center into a rival to Wall Street.” The “patriot prime minister” had “taken a country that was on its knees and made it stand tall again” according to BBC News. The US admired her patriotism as well. Fox News reported “she never faltered, in word or deed, in her support of the United States,” while NBC News quoted President Barack Obama calling Thatcher “an exemplar of British strength” and a “role model for young women.”
Whenever a report offered a negative statement, it quickly switched back to something positive, while reminders of respecting the deceased became a common refrain. This kind of coverage paid little attention to the drawbacks of Thatcher’s economic policies, such as the detrimental effects they had on the average working person while continuing to make the rich richer. Anything truly controversial was left out of corporate media coverage, such as her support for Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, her support of the apartheid regime, or her use of police and the secret service to defeat powerful unions.87 With a leader whose political values closely mirrored those of the US establishment, there was not much room for unfavorable facts to be mentioned. Yet no such restraint was shown to Chávez in the US.

While corporate media coverage for Margaret Thatcher was mostly fawning and kept in a tone of respect for the recently deceased, the same respect was not given when it came to coverage of the death of Hugo Chavez. Corporate outlets mentioned some of the good Chávez did with redirecting Venezuela’s oil profits toward social programs for the poor, along with some affirmative statistics such as a stark decrease in poverty, child mortality, and malnutrition deaths.88 But for every one of these statements, there were numerous that promptly followed, representing an opposing, belittling comment. Common criticisms included the country’s high inflation, high crime rates, and Venezuela being left with an unsustainable economic model, all of which had a tendency to be exaggerated. Some, like Pamela Sampson of Associated Press went so far as to say that Chávez wasted money on the poor and could have built lavish cities like in Dubai. Jim Nureckas, of the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), quoted Sampson,

Chávez invested Venezuela’s oil wealth into social programs including state-run food markets, cash benefits for poor families, free health clinics and education programs. But those gains were meager compared with the spectacular construction projects that oil riches spurred in glittering Middle Eastern cities, including the world’s tallest building in Dubai and plans for branches of the Louvre and Guggenheim museums in Abu Dhabi.89
Naureckas remarked:

That’s right: Chávez squandered his nation’s oil money on healthcare, education and nutrition when he could have been building the world’s tallest building or his own branch of the Louvre. What kind of monster has priorities like that?90

Furthermore, reporting became exceptionally poor when it came to personal attacks on Chávez. Descriptions ranged from CBS referring to him as a “bully” to USA Today quoting that he ran “the Venezuelan economy and political system into the ground,” with the worst being Fox News calling him a “dictator” and “thug,” stating that “many rejoiced” upon his death.91 So much for extending respect to the dead, as was the rallying cry around any criticism of Margaret Thatcher. American comedian turned cultural critic George Carlin once said—let’s not have a double standard here, one standard will do just fine. Indeed.92

US corporate media coverage of the deaths of Margaret Thatcher and Hugo Chávez were skewed and misrepresented in many respects, and primarily positive reporting only went to the leader that more closely represented the policies of the US. The corporate press in America never gave the public a fair or balanced accounting in the matter. And that degree of framing and spin is clearly News Abuse.

EPITAPH AS EPILOGUE, AND THE REBIRTH OF MEDIA FREEDOM

*It is not necessary to conceal anything from a public insensible to contradiction and narcotized by technological diversions.*


Over the years, the research for these Junk Food News and News Abuse chapters amounts to a cultural epitaph for the American public. Cultural historian Morris Berman, in his last book *Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline*, painstakingly points out that America has become a land victimized by its own illusions of prog-
ress, crass materialism, and anti-intellectual furor, all heralded as the “American way” by corporate media. But there are more Americans and more global citizens born every day, and through education, media literacy, critical thinking, community building, and the fostering of increased awareness and solidarity, we can build a movement to navigate these troubled waters history has given us.

While this chapter closes on bleak notes, we must be ever alerted to the fact that across the US and the world, millions of people yearn for a better life, more transparent governments, and broader possibilities of who we can become as a global village. Part of the Junk Food and News Abuse chapter “snarkily” calls out the chicanery of corporate media failures, but it does so to also illustrate that we the people are in on the game and can transcend it.

While we certainly want to pressure big media to keep the public informed given the size and potential significance of their megaphone, we can’t merely wait for change to come. We must also be that change. Together, working with each other on more independent and grassroots levels, we can more accurately inform each other and become the media. By what we do and how we act, we make irrelevant the once towering but now gatekeeping institutions of the corporate press—ones now teetering, faltering, built on houses of cards and lies, waiting for their own epitaph to be scribed. It is one that we the people, the independent and citizen journalists of tomorrow, will happily write in our own headlines of a people’s history in the making. Count on it. Be the media. Free the press. Via, veritas, vita.

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Michael Kolbe, Sam Park, Jennifer Eiden, and Kimberly Soiero are past or present Project Censored interns, undergraduates and college graduates alike, who contributed to this chapter.
Notes


2. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, (New York: Penguin, 1985). This chapter has been guided by Postman’s work for some time, and also informed by other like-minded scholars including Chris Hedges, Mark Crispin Miller, Daniel J. Boorstin, Marshall McLuhan, Jean Baudrillard, and Morris Berman, to name a few.

3. The decline of American civilization has been the serious subject of numerous scholars for the better part of half a century. For more on this thesis, and some of the latest scholarly work on the matter, see Morris Berman, Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012).


5. Jodi Enda and Amy Mitchell, “Americans Show Signs of Leaving a News Outlet, Citing Less Information,” State of the News Media 2013: An Annual Report on American Journalism, Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism (2013), http://stateofthemedia.org/2013/special-reports-landing-page/citing-reduced-quality-many-americans-abandon-news-outlets. Other issues impacting media credibility and public trust include serious news blunders by major corporate media outlets, like this past year when CNN and Fox both reported that the Obama health care law was overturned by the Supreme Court, while it was not, but both networks rushed to broadcast before getting all the facts and were slow to reverse course. See Steve Myers, “Were CNN and Fox News’ Mistakes on Supreme Court Ruling Part of ‘Process Journalism’?” Poynter.org, June 29, 2012, http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/top-stories/179341/were-cnn-fox-news-mistakes-on-supreme-court-ruling-part-of-process-journalism.

6. Ibid.

7. “Fox News Credibility Declines,” Public Policy Polling, February 6, 2013, http://www.publicpolling.com/pdf/2011/PPP_Release_National_206.pdf. On voters’ views on news sources: “We continue to find that Democrats trust most TV news sources other than Fox, while Republicans don’t trust anything except Fox,” said Dean Debnam, president of Public Policy Polling. “News preferences are very polarizing along party lines.” In other words, people believe their sources of news are okay, and that all the rest of them are bunk.


9. Ibid.


27. Ibid.


29. Ibid.


34. For the original and more detailed definition and explanation of News Abuse, see Peter Phillips, ed., Censored 2003 (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 196.


45. Ibid.


49. Vicky Nissen, “Was Stevens Murdered?”


51. Ibid.

52. Ibid.


54. Ibid.


60. Jesse Thomas, “A Tribute to Twinkie.”


64. Alice Hines, “Twinkie Shortage.”


70. “Walmart Strike Goes Nationwide on Black Friday.”


73. Susan Berfield, “Walmart vs. Union-Backed OUR Walmart.”


81. Amy Goodman, “Expanding the Debate Exclusive.”
91. Ibid.