CHAPTER 3

A Vast Wasteland
The Ongoing Reign of Junk Food News and News Abuse

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When television is good, nothing—not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers—nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your own television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland.

—Newton Minow, chairman, Federal Communications Commission, 1961

INTRODUCTION

Project Censored founder Dr. Carl Jensen was a pioneer in education. He not only constructively criticized the corporate news media, he educated students in how to help them hold it accountable. As a result, Project Censored has left an indelible mark on thousands of individuals since 1976. Jensen inspired educators, students, and activists to not only unearth problems in the way news is consumed,
but to look for solutions in creating a more democratic media. The collaboration resulted in an annual list of news stories underreported or censored by the corporate press, and much more. His work drew the attention of news insiders who accused him of overstating the problem of censorship. They claimed that they were not censoring information, but simply had a limited amount of television time and print space to cover every story. They called it news judgment. Jensen, again demonstrating his commitment to the importance of a free press, refuted those claims, stating that, if it was news judgment, it had gone terribly awry. He called much of what the news media covered Junk Food News, another product of the vast wasteland of media that extended well beyond television.

Junk Food News analysis highlights how the corporate media peddle irrelevant, sensationalist, and entertaining tales in place of actual newsworthy stories, like those covered by the independent press (showcased in Chapter 1). Each year, when students compile Junk Food News stories, they provide a context for how corporate and independent media decide to use their news judgment. Unfortunately, Junk Food News is like Kanye West at an awards ceremony. It keeps popping up everywhere to interrupt and distract viewers’ focus. This chapter of our annual book illuminates the important work of independent news outlets that could be further covered if the corporate media were not hell-bent on peddling Junk Food News.

When Peter Phillips became the director of Project Censored, he created an offshoot of Junk Food News known as News Abuse. Like his predecessor, Phillips provided students with an opportunity to learn about the news while holding the corporate media accountable. A News Abuse story is a newsworthy story that is covered by the corporate press in a manner that makes it less newsworthy. This is because the spin or perspective on the particular story acts as a mechanism to distort information while distracting viewers and readers from other significant perspectives (or other stories entirely). One example was the extensive coverage of Ebola, which was a potentially important health story, but it was over-covered by corporate media and the threat wildly over-exaggerated. Further, this sensational deluge came in lieu of 2014 midterm election coverage in the US, something that actually affected Americans, unlike Ebola.
A News Abuse story dupes viewers like Holly Fischer duped family values conservatives in 2015. Fischer was known as a flag-waving, gun-toting, Bible-reading, pro-life Tea Partier. She caught her fifteen minutes of Internet fame as pictures emerged of her brandishing an assault rifle and Bible in front of a US flag on Facebook after supporting Chick-fil-A’s and Hobby Lobby’s stance against gay marriage. But then the online darling was caught having sex at a family values convention with a Tea Party cameraman while her husband was overseas serving in the US military. Some things aren’t what they seem. News Abuse stories have a tendency to leave people feeling they’ve been played by the media, and indeed, in the examples we bring forward, they often have.

**Illusions of Objectivity: Ongoing Challenges Behind the News**

One way that audiences are played or duped by the corporate news media is by their acceptance of the media’s claims of objectivity. However, the conflicts of interest between the political elite and corporate media act to shape public opinion to serve the interests of the powerful over the public. This conflict is derived from the coveted ratings and subsequent profits garnered by journalists for big media because of their access to those in power. The corporate news outlets believe that an interview or segment on the economic or political elites will result in a larger audience than those stories that focus on common people, or those who challenge the status quo. However, in order to maintain access to those in power, corporate media journalists are pressured to provide favorable, or at the very least noncritical, coverage of those in power or risk their access to those individuals and their careers as journalists. This is a serious blight on any pretensions toward objectivity.

The corporate media’s acquiescence to those in power is not actually a secret to those paying attention. For example, in 2014, MSNBC’s Chuck Todd of *Meet the Press* admitted that his career goals prevented him from asking tough questions. Todd explained that if he asked his guests tough questions, they would not return to his program. He believes if he cannot get high-profile guests, his ratings will drop and his show could be cancelled. In fact, journalists’ dependency on high-
profile figures fosters friendships to the point where the reporting is done to serve rather than challenge those in power (what Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky call the “sourcing” filter in their 1988 groundbreaking book, *Manufacturing Consent*).

In another example, in 2015, Hillary Clinton held a dinner with journalists before announcing her candidacy for president of the United States, presumably trading friendly reporting for the inside scoop on her announcement. Similarly, President Barack Obama held a private meeting with journalists in 2015 to garner favorable news coverage of his proposed nuclear deal with Iran. It resulted in Obama’s favor as the corporate media discussion over the Iran deal was largely complimentary, with the White House controlling the dialogue on the topic and the perspectives of the people of Iran rarely sought.

The close relationship between those in power and the corporate media is quite visible in the well-publicized White House Correspondents’ Association (WHCA) dinner. The annual event is attended by politicians, celebrities, and journalists for a night of laughs, drinks, food, and friendship. The WHCA is a collection of journalists who report on the president and national political affairs. The event includes ritualized mocking of the president and the press as they revel in their close relationship between laughs. In 2007, the *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich argued that the dinner is “a crystallization of the press’s failures in the post-9/11 era” as it “illustrates how easily a propaganda-driven White House can enlist the Washington news media in its shows.”

While the real story of the event is the dangerously close relationship between those in power and the supposed watchdog corporate press, the corporate journalists distract the public with coverage of the First Lady’s dress or the top ten jokes of the evening. Similarly, the corporate press lauds President Obama for making jokes at the expense of former vice president Dick Cheney, but ignores that the jokes do nothing to undo the Bush/Cheney–era policies, some of which Obama has kept in place and even expanded. This is what Noam Chomsky called maintaining necessary illusions—in this case, that the press is free and challenges and holds those in power to account in the public interest. If only that were the case.
New Technology, Same Censorship: An Issue of Media Literacy

While the work of Project Censored has increased students’ knowledge and awareness about censorship, the larger population lacks basic critical media literacy skills. The US education system does not provide the citizenry with the skills to access, analyze, evaluate, create, reflect, and act in the digital world. Without these skills, Americans are unaware of and susceptible to the dangers of corporate media reporting. Since the start of the twenty-first century Americans have celebrated the invention of digital technologies as a form of liberation from the problematic corporate media. However, the technology has not always lived up to the hype as Americans are unaware of how to use these technologies to position themselves as equitable democratic participants in the twenty-first century. This is an issue of media literacy.

Since the 1990s, critics have argued that the problems with corporate media would be ameliorated by the advent of the Internet and digital technologies. This vision seemed to be coming to fruition as the millennial generation (those born between 1982 and 2004) developed different news consumption habits than previous generations. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center study on media consumption, roughly 60 percent of the millennial generation relies on Facebook as their main source of political news. In contrast, baby boomers (ages fifty to sixty-eight) get 60 percent of their news from local television.

Despite the advent of the Internet and the work of groups like Project Censored, the previous three generations differ little in their trust and mistrust of news sources. Pew found that fourteen out of thirty-six sources were trusted by all three generations, while only four out of ten are mistrusted. The three sources that millennials trust more so than the other generations are *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and Al Jazeera America. Two of these are not news programs (one no longer airs), and the other is a foreign source.

Digital technologies have not made US citizens more media literate or interested in the political process. Almost a quarter of millennials on social networking sites report that over half of the content they are exposed to is related to politics, yet they express
less interest in political news than baby boomers and Generation Xers (aged thirty-three to fifty). While the baby boomers have more of an interest in political news, they are more likely to read articles on social media that confirm rather than challenge their views. The Pew study implies that if millennials maintain their news consumption habits, they will mirror previous generations who use news to confirm rather than challenge their views. Project Censored remarked upon this very trend in *Censored 2011*, Chapter 3, “Manufacturing Distraction: Junk Food News and News Abuse on a Feed to Know Basis.” It seems that with the rise of social media this pattern has continued with self-selection biases simply taking place on smaller screens.

When former FCC Chairman Newton Minow used the phrase “vast wasteland,” he was referring to a wasteland in terms of potential for a mass medium squandered and a TV world where news was only fifteen minutes a day. Now, we have news 24/7, which has created what Carl Jensen called news inflation. While there is now more time spent on news programming, it seems to be worth less and less when one critically assesses content. Despite the existence of digital technologies and the vast troves of information they hold, it remains up to the public to acquire critical media literacy skills as users of digital technology. These skills enable citizens to use digital tools to find factual information paramount for equitable democratic participation in the twenty-first century (see Chapter 5). Otherwise, the close relationship between corporate news outlets and the political elite will continue to obfuscate stories in maintenance of the plutocracy (News Abuse) or report on stories that are outright nonsensical distractions (Junk Food News). Both act to divert attention away from the real scandals and issues that matter to citizens and keep the public anemic on factual stories while offering an all-you-can-eat buffet of bread and circuses. In this regard, the 2014–15 year does not disappoint, unless one values intellect, integrity, and a civic-minded news frame.
JUNK FOOD NEWS FROM 2014–15

If, however, the public does not receive all the information it needs to make informed decisions . . . then some form of news blackout is taking place . . . some issues are overlooked (what we call “censored”) and other issues are over-covered (what we call “junk food news”).

—Carl Jensen

The 2014–15 year was jam-packed with more junk than Courtney Love’s veins. In a year that saw important issues raised such as race in Ferguson, Missouri, imperialism in Palestine, human rights over the US drone strikes, and democracy with the protests in Hong Kong, the corporate media continued to peddle junk. Their coverage was obsessed with deflated balls and the Oscars as corporate pundits freaked the public out over Ebola in between speculative coverage of the presidential campaigns and the death of Mrs. Doubtfire.

Liberally Snubbing a Celebrated Sniper

The Academy Awards come around once a year providing those in the film industry with an opportunity to laud each other. It is an ego-fueled spectacle of lavish waste from a community of profit-driven entertainers. Despite much of the triviality of the Oscars, the corporate media give it extensive coverage every year.

After the coverage of the outfits worn by the guests and the speculation over who would win, the corporate media focused on the politics behind the awards. Fox News, clinging to its conservative image, attacked “liberal Hollywood” for not awarding the film American Sniper with the Oscar for Best Picture. American Sniper is the work of the Republican director (and frequent empty chair whopper) Clint Eastwood, who based the film on the autobiography of US Navy SEAL Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper) concerning his time in Iraq. Kyle, like Christopher Columbus centuries earlier, used superior military technology to occupy, subdue, and murder people in a foreign land. In 2013, Kyle was accidentally killed at a shooting range while a controversy over the unsubstantiated claims...
in his book emerged. Nonetheless, Sean Hannity and others at Fox News were enraged that this nationalistically charged film about an American sniper killing people from a distance did not win the coveted Award for Best Picture. Hannity tweeted, “AMERICAN Sniper snubbed by liberal hwood Predictable. #CluelessOscars.” Fox’s morning talk show Fox and Friends ran a discussion segment asking if American Sniper got snubbed. The online entertainment publication Mediaite summed up the segment as “Hollywood bad, Oscars bad, Sniper good.”

The same morning that Fox and Friends hosts gossiped about who should have won Best Picture, Democracy Now! reported that in the five months prior to February 2015, the US had killed 1,600 people in Syria. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights concluded that most of those killed had been ISIS fighters, a group deemed to be an enemy by the US government. However, at least sixty-two civilians were also killed in those attacks by the US. Thus, while Fox went on a diatribe demanding that the factious portrayal of Kyle’s actions be celebrated, more innocent people were dying at the hands of the US for reasons not provided to the American people nor condoned by a war resolution in Congress.

Corporate Media Has Deflated Balls

Every year when the National Football League (NFL) Super Bowl concludes, sports fans face the reality that they have to wait almost seven months for the next season to begin. However, by the time the 2015 Super Bowl ended, the corporate press was still blue over the balls from the American Football Conference (AFC) Championship Game, a game that saw the New England Patriots defeat the Indianapolis Colts to earn a chance to play for the NFL Championship at Super Bowl XLIX. The Colts then accused the Patriots of cheating in the game by intentionally using underinflated footballs to improve their passing game. The NFL has rules on the inflation weight of balls and determined that, indeed, eleven of the twelve game balls in the AFC Championship Game were underinflated. The corporate media fixated on an elderly man who was seen on camera entering a restroom with twelve footballs, where he stayed for “98 seconds,” before exiting the restroom and returning
the balls to the field. What this elderly man did with the balls in the
restroom remains a mystery. The corporate press covered the league
fallout as NFL Hall of Famers Joe Montana and Jerry Rice blamed
Brady for the underinflated balls and called the act “cheating.” The
Deflategate or Ballghazi scandal was featured on the corporate news
channels heavily through February 2015.

While the corporate media ran up the middle to cover the deflated
ball scandal, the independent press went deep for the long bombs—
those involving US drone strikes in Yemen. By the start of 2015, the
Yemeni government collapsed. The US did not seek government
clearance to carry out drone strikes in the region, which meant there
was no mechanism to warn or help the citizens impacted by drone
strikes. In fact, drone strikes in Yemen are not uncommon. Between
2001 and 2015, there were 90 to 109 confirmed strikes in Yemen,
which left up to 639 dead. At least ninety-six of the dead were con-
firmed as civilians not targeted by the US and eight others were chil-
dren. Presumably, this will lead to anti-American sentiment among
individuals who have had loved ones unjustly killed by the US, which
could result in future attacks on US soil. When much of the nation’s
attention was spent on getting down and dirty on the Patriots’ deflated
balls, the US was busy creating potential enemies for tomorrow in the
end zone of the Middle East as the war on terror goes into sudden
death overtime for many in the region.

Mrs. Hamas-Fire

It can be tough to lose someone and everyone copes in their own way.
The corporate press copes by using death as a sensationalistic story to
distract from more relevant stories. In summer 2014, their grief porn
parade hit full stride with the suicide of comedian and actor Robin
Williams. Almost immediately, Williams, the star of such great films as
Mrs. Doubtfire, Dead Poets Society, and Good Will Hunting, became
a staple story of the twenty-four-hour news cycle. In fact, President
Obama and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel paid tribute to Wil-
liams for his contribution to the armed forces. CNN provided cov-
erage of the celebrities who paid tribute on social media to the fallen
star. However, the coverage went beyond parroting the comments of
Williams’s fans. ABC News streamed a live video of Robin Williams’s home. They later apologized because Williams’s family had asked for privacy. Yahoo! published an article on its webpage that had a picture of Robin Williams with the headline “HANGED” among other sensationalist phrases. The coverage dragged out over weeks as the media morbidly awaited the coroner’s report, which, given how Williams had died, was merely the final phase of this mourning sickness saga.

The coverage of Williams’s death distracted from the US involvement in Israeli and Palestinian relations. While the corporate press tried to outdo one another for best grief porn POV, independent journalists found that the US had knowledge of and allowed Israel to target citizens in Gaza. Israel had a blockade against Gaza, even restricting food imports to levels below those necessary to maintain a minimum caloric intake. These restrictions were put in place in order to target the group Hamas, which Israel views as a terrorist organization. However, it is likely that the treatment of people in Gaza is not to remove Hamas. In fact, in 2006, the levels of poverty and malnutrition were so severe that Hamas sent a letter to then President George W. Bush stating that they would recognize Israel as a state and cease hostilities to end the blockade. These were two key demands that the US and Israel had, but the offer was ignored. Thus, the US allowed the targeting of citizens in the region by Israel while denouncing the Palestinians for violence. It occurred while thousands of people watched One Hour Photo and reruns of Mork and Mindy to cope with losing Williams. Meanwhile, 2,139 Palestinians were killed as a result of Israel’s Operation Protective Edge. Most were civilians, including 490 children, and the onslaught destroyed twenty thousand homes in Gaza, creating half a million refugees. While the loss of Robin Williams is tragic, what happened in Gaza is something that truly deserves collective grief and far more attention from the news media.

Will They? Won’t They?

Americans love a great Will they? Won’t they? story, like the sexual tension between Ross and Rachel on Friends or LeBron James choosing
between Miami and Cleveland. The US presidential elections are the biggest Will they? Won't they? for the corporate media. What makes this upcoming presidential cycle extra junky is that in 2014–15, the corporate press was not even covering an election; they were covering people who might run in the election. Much of their focus was on the dynastic implications of a 1992 rematch involving the Bushes and Clintons in the 2016 election.

The corporate media was fixated on the prospect of a Bush dynasty, with Jeb as the third potential president from the family. In late 2014, CNN mused openly about a possible 2016 presidential run from the former Florida governor and the son and brother of former presidents. A month later, the corporate press questioned if 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney would make another run at the White House. He quickly claimed he would not be running, which led the corporate media to muse on whether Romney dropping out improved Jeb’s chances of becoming president. While the corporate media covered Bush not announcing anything, the independent outlet ThinkProgress noted that David and Charles Koch, a.k.a. the Koch brothers, a pair of wealthy conservative donors, were spending $889 million of their wealth on candidates in the 2016 elections. That is more than double the amount the Kochs spent on the 2012 election. The Kochs are known for using their funds to create and disseminate disinformation about numerous issues such as climate change. In fact, in 2012, they surpassed companies such as ExxonMobil in funding climate change denial research. Thus, the implications of their campaign donations are a much more newsworthy story than the fodder surrounding Bush and his potential competitors.

Bush was not the only former president surname to be agonizingly followed with the question: Will you run? Former US senator, secretary of state, and first lady Hillary Clinton garnered much of the corporate media’s speculative 2016 election coverage. In February 2015, a full two months before Clinton announced her campaign for the presidency, the New York Times and Fox News were already criticizing her for not giving a clear answer on issues of wealth inequality. Then Fox went after Hillary’s donors, noting that many of them are the most hated companies in America. The coverage of Hillary was very
extensive, so much so that the corporate media covered her meal at Chipotle—a chicken burrito bowl—instead of covering that another candidate had entered the race: US Senator Marco Rubio.42

Hillary’s Chipotle visit did not just distract from the Rubio campaign, it was deemed more newsworthy than national workers’ mass protests. On April 15, 2015, while Hillary was eating at Chipotle, thousands of fast food workers around the nation went on strike, demanding fifteen dollars an hour.43 The protest was referred to as the “largest low-wage worker protest” in US history.44 In two hundred US cities, tens of thousands of working-class men and women in the “fast food, laundry, home care, child care, retail, and education” fields protested for better wages. Solidarity strikes were held in thirty-five countries on six continents.45 Rather than cover the people in the streets fighting for equality, fair treatment, and workers’ rights, including fast food workers, the corporate media covered the trivial and meaningless fast food order of a powerful woman running for president. That photo op is likely as close to standing with the working poor that Hillary, merely ordering from them at Chipotle, will get all year.

While the coverage of the potential presidential candidates may be newsworthy, their fast food purchases are the essence of Junk Food News. One can witness how journalists become enamored by their proximity to those in power as they follow and get close to potential candidates, cataloging their every irrelevant move, while ignoring other more significant stories. The Will they? Won’t they? horse-race approach to elections is another type of coverage used to keep the voters uninformed yet at the edge of their seats.

NEWS ABUSE AS PROPAGANDA

More than a half century ago Hitler said the masses take a long time to understand and remember, thus it is necessary to repeat the message time and time and time again. The public must be conditioned to accept the claims that are made... no matter how outrageous or false those claims might be.

—Carl Jensen46
News Abuse is a subtle form of censorship; it relies on news coverage as a mechanism of manipulating public opinion. The reason for the manipulation is not always clear, but often its goal is to further the economic and political interests of those in power. By manipulating public opinion, the corporate press can influence voters to support or defeat legislation regardless of how well it addresses the voters’ interests. That awesome amount of power holds extreme potential to improve the larger society. However, it is often used at the expense of the majority of people.

Viewers often know they are watching Junk Food News and have lamented its increase over the years. But News Abuse is a different calamity because while viewers believe they are being well informed about important matters, the actual coverage of the stories acts to manipulate, misinform, and even disinform—i.e., News Abuse is a form of propaganda. This past year, once again the corporate press strived to introduce important stories on police killings, ISIS, and sexual assault, only to skew coverage of these issues to such an extent that potential meaningful discussions of these stories were squashed under bad puns, false and biased data, and celebrity-focused coverage. While corporate media battled over the question of who was the bigger liar—Bill O’Reilly of Fox News or Brian Williams, then at NBC Nightly News—there was no clear winner declared. However, there was a clear loser: the American public.

The News Is the News

Journalists, pundits, and reporters are supposed to provide information and perspective about important issues of the day. However, in the era of homogenized, for-profit infotainment, the corporate news media has birthed news celebrities such as Bill O’Reilly, Brian Williams, Rachel Maddow, and Anderson Cooper, among others. The intersection of corporate media personality and celebrity status with a news outlet’s dedication to covering entertainment-based stories has resulted in the news becoming the news in its own distracting way. Throughout the previous year, the networks, journalists, reporters, and pundits who frequently mislead the public in various ways turned on each other by accusing each other of misleading
the public. This hypocritical attempt at retribution for the sins of a deceitful past made for a never-ending cycle of News Abuse, which falsified the past to manipulate the present and almost certainly destroy the future.

**FOX NEWS: A VICTIM OF CENSORSHIP?**

This past year, Fox News remained the most watched twenty-four-hour news station. Their ratings undermine CNN’s claim that CNN is the “most trusted” news channel. Despite its popularity and significant global exposure, Fox claimed it was the victim of “censorship.” Fox, a network that has censored various news stories and perspectives—particularly left-of-center ones—since 1996, claimed that DISH Network, a television service provider, was censoring Fox programming. DISH refused to broadcast Fox programming until they agreed to DISH’s financial demands.

Fox’s commitment to anticensorship could hardly be considered genuine given that they ignore issues of censorship unless they decrease their profits. For example, when journalist Jeremy Scahill argued that the White House intimidation and judicial decisions to force journalists to turn over their sources was an assault on press freedoms, Fox did not cover it. In fact, Fox has intimidated reporters into self-censorship. In 2015, a *Daily Caller* journalist was told that he could not criticize Fox News because Tucker Carlson, who also works for the *Daily Caller*, is a Fox News contributor. Fox apparently warned Carlson that if he criticizes Fox he could lose his job, and that the same could happen if he is associated with someone who criticizes the network.

**BILL O’LIELY VS. B.S. WILLIAMS**

In February 2015, Americans were exposed to a series of developments that implicated top journalists in the corporate news media lie. Despite there being tomes written on the matter over the decades, this drew major attention in the corporate media. The controversy initially swirled around Brian Williams, host of *NBC Nightly News*. Stars and Stripes, a military news organization, exposed Williams for lying in a news report about having been in a helicopter that had been hit by rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) in Iraq. Rather than
reflect on how Williams’s behavior is part of a widespread structural problem in the industry, the corporate media created its own tangled tale, turning a story about false statements in journalism into a distracting and misleading celebrity sideshow. In fact, when NBC publicly noted that they were investigating Williams’s claims (while he received six months unpaid leave), pundits pondered the meaning for his career as a celebrity anchorman. Would he be fired? Would he still get invites to *The Late Show* with David Letterman and *The Daily Show*? Could NBC manage without the easy recognition that Williams’s celebrity offered? Further, how might they deal with the real fallout from the fact that Williams lied during his reporting?

In the weeks following the revelations about Williams’s initial fraudulent tale, the corporate media began to report on other misleading statements and outright lies from Williams. The false stories included Williams’s hotel in New Orleans allegedly being attacked by gangs shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the falsification of the number of puppies rescued from a fire. A report in *New York* magazine revealed that, among other systemic issues, celebrity treatment of news personalities was part of the problem. In fact, Williams’s career goal was to take over *The Tonight Show*. In the midst of the illumination of Williams’s lies, many in the corporate news industry defended Williams as simply conflating his role as a journalist with his role as an entertainer. However, by late spring 2015, more reports of Williams’s deceptions appeared to end any chance of Williams returning to television.

Fox News personality Bill O’Reilly responded to the Williams story by encouraging greater scrutiny of journalists, all while excusing Williams’s lies. The independent news outlet *Mother Jones* responded to O’Reilly’s comments by doing what Project Censored has done for thirty-nine years: documenting the lies of corporate media. *Mother Jones* noted that O’Reilly had his own history of lying, including falsified claims about his war coverage. *Mother Jones*’s coverage of an already well-documented story—that Fox News pundits lie—explained that O’Reilly had lied about rescuing a cameraman from an approaching army during the Falklands War in Argentina. In fact, O’Reilly was not even in the Falkland Islands during that time, and even the cameraman claimed the event never happened.
response, O’Reilly changed his story, claiming he had been talking about the riots on the mainland. Even if that is true, O’Reilly is being quite liberal, for once, in interpreting what constitutes a “war zone.” Journalists dug deeper into O’Reilly’s claims and, similar to Williams’s case, numerous other lies were unearthed. For example, O’Reilly had lied about seeing nuns murdered in El Salvador and being outside the door of George de Mohrenschildt as he shot himself. Mohrenschildt was a friend of Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy. In April 2015, Media Matters found so many O’Reilly lies they were able to create an e-book about them. And back in 2003, Seven Stories Press (publisher of the Censored yearbooks) published The Oh Really? Factor, written by Peter Hart of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), filled with the false statements and reports of O’Reilly, so there is long-standing precedent on the matter.

While the O’Reilly versus Williams coverage had the flare of Junk Food News, it qualifies as News Abuse because it was obfuscated into a liberal versus conservative debate rather than proof of the institutional obfuscation, disinformation, and manipulation of the corporate news industry. In fact, the only area where Williams and O’Reilly differed was in their apology. Williams admitted fault while O’Reilly did not; instead the latter continuously amended his statements while claiming to be the victim of the liberal media. This contributed to the false corporate news media narrative that the claims against O’Reilly were not factually based, but an ideological attack by the “liberal left.”

If the corporate media were dedicated to holding themselves accountable, not only should they have removed Williams and O’Reilly from the air, but they should have also covered the various manipulations of truth in corporate reporting during the 2014–15 year. For example, NBC’s Richard Engel was reportedly kidnapped in 2012 by the Syrian government. His kidnapping was used to support the call for the US invasion and overthrow of the Syrian government. However, Democracy Now! and First Look Media, among others, reported that Engel appeared to have been captured by rebels in Syria, not the Syrian government. Yet NBC did not retract the false story.
Furthermore, if the corporate media wanted to report on factors that contribute to deceitful news coverage, they could have covered the *New York Times* for failing to disclose that their pro-oil policy op-ed was funded by the oil companies, or the clear conflict of interest concerning the *Washington Post*’s frequent publication of climate change denial pieces by Ed Rogers, a former member of the Reagan and Bush I administrations, who is also a Chevron lobbyist.  

Lastly, if the corporate media were interested in unearthing the truth, they could illuminate their own coverage of staged events. For example, in 2015, when a Florida district considered taking land from large sugar companies in order to expand access to water for residents, a massive Tea Party rally in opposition emerged at the water plant, garnering a lot of corporate media coverage. However, *Raw Story* reported that the protesters were actually actors hired by the Tea Party of Miami and US Sugar, a major sugar company. These stories and the others like them demonstrate that the corporate news media is not only uninterested in reporting truthfully, but also that—considering the Williams versus O’Reilly debacle—they seem to be less committed to honest reporting as a whole.

JUDITH THE DUPlicitous

While the corporate media put up a divisive front against contemporary celebrity journalists’ lies, a ghost of the deceptive past reemerged. In 2015, former *New York Times* reporter and current Fox News contributor Judith Miller, whose 2002–03 inaccurate articles on Iraq’s chemical weapons program were integral in shifting US public opinion toward a war in Iraq, released the book *No Apologies*. In a series of television appearances promoting the book, Miller argued that the invasion of Iraq was not her fault because her sources, mostly from Bush administration connections and insiders, had lied to her and her editors published them. Of course a journalist’s job is not only to find evidence but to verify it, but that did not happen in this case. Miller acted unfamiliar with that elementary rule of journalism.

MSNBC and the *New York Times* took Miller’s rewriting of history as an opportunity to rewrite their own. MSNBC allowed *New York
Times reporter Nick Confessore to lambaste Miller over her excuses for the false reporting that led to the Iraq invasion. While Miller deserves a tongue lashing at the very least, Confessore’s diatribe was a bait and switch on the matter, serving to obfuscate the history of the affair. First, it positioned the New York Times as a paper of record, concerned with the truth, despite over a decade earlier publishing Miller’s false tales. Furthermore, MSNBC, by providing the interview for Confessore, positioned itself as the antiwar, pro-truth, corporate network. However, it was MSNBC that sacked antiwar programmers such as Phil Donahue and Jesse Ventura from their network to make space for more pro-war voices in the year leading up to the 2003 Iraq invasion. In fact, according to MSNBC’s own internal memos, they let go of their antiwar voices to increase ratings. Thus, while the corporate press lambasted Judith Miller for rewriting history, they were rewriting their own, excluding the role they played in the calamitous 2003 invasion of Iraq, which by 2015 had cost US taxpayers over three trillion dollars, the lives of thousands of Americans, and over a million dead Iraqis.

Ebola: The Outbreak that Wasn’t

In the 2014–15 news cycle, the corporate media used the Ebola “crisis” as a Trojan horse to instill fear in Americans while inciting anti-immigrant sentiments. Ebola is a virus largely found in West Africa. It starts with flu-like symptoms and can be fatal. However, Ebola patients are extremely rare in the US. The first case of Ebola in the US came from a medical assistant working with Doctors Without Borders. The patient recovered twenty days later. There would only be three other cases of Ebola diagnosed in the US after the medical assistant, but the corporate media saw an opportunity to turn this non-health emergency into a sensationalistic issue.

The corporate media quickly politicized Ebola. ABC and Fox contributor Laura Ingraham claimed that the Obama administration does not understand the importance of “our nation-state” and has an obsession with “open borders.” Ingraham’s statement ignored that in Obama’s first term he removed more than one million undocumented immigrants. Conservative radio host Rush
Limbaugh echoed Ingraham, arguing that the US purposely “had somebody come across the border carrying Ebola with them.” A Fox News guest further perpetuated public fear by stating, “It’s not that they’re undocumented, it’s that they’re uninspected.” However, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reported that there was “zero evidence” to state that immigrants are carrying Ebola into the country. In fact, US Naval Medical Researcher Daniel G. Bausch said, “The likelihood of an illegal migrant getting infected and introducing the disease to the US is probably less than that of a ‘legal’ traveler.” Meanwhile, Fox’s Bill O’Reilly accused the CDC director of being a “propagandist” and demanded that he “should resign.”

The hysteria over Ebola symbolizes the corporate media’s xenophobic and racist perspective on other contemporary issues as well. Corporate media frequently emphasize the use of non-Western medicine in Africa in order to create more fear in the US. For example, Fox News’s Andrea Tantaros stated, “In these countries, they do not believe in traditional medical care. So someone could get off a flight and seek treatment from a witch doctor that would practice Santeria.” Fox News contributor Stacy Hooks suggested that each state needs an Ebola quarantined hospital. Instead of providing more medical assistance to the region actually in need, Hooks argued to throw millions of dollars to assist the nonexistent Ebola “epidemic” in the US. CNN went a step farther, bringing the war on terror into the mix by airing the headline, “Ebola: The ISIS of Biological Agents?”

However, there was no proof for CNN’s claim. The corporate media criticized health care professional Kaci Hickox, who returned from overseas with no sign of symptoms but was asked by Maine Governor Paul LePage to be quarantined. When she refused, she was called “selfish” on Hannity and The O’Reilly Factor. More fear was generated by CNN Tonight, which interviewed the author of a fiction book, Outbreak, that portrayed an Ebola outbreak in the US. The author’s lack of official medical credentials did not make him unfit to scare people. In fact, the only thing about Ebola going viral in the US was the media’s meme of fear. The corporate media did not once touch on the correlation between the deforestation in West Africa and its impact on the surrounding ecosystem. Bats, most likely the pri-
mary carriers of the Ebola virus, came in contact with people more often as their habitats were compromised.

The timing of the Ebola story is also suspect. It ran in the months before the 2014 midterm election, causing fear that was so powerful it distracted from coverage of the candidates. Nearly a thousand news segments regarding Ebola ran from October 7 through the day before the November 4 election. Once the election was over, only forty-nine segments were aired in the two weeks after November 4, also downplaying the hysteria and confirming there was no widespread outbreak. Thus, the corporate media played the American public like a fiddle, spreading fear, if not Ebola, in an effort to distract the public from the substantive issues of the election and candidate positions.

Ongoing Islamophobic Narratives

Islamophobia has largely been accepted by the establishment culture of the US in the post-9/11 era. The corporate media and US government have sensationalized these fears by legitimizing ethnocentric and xenophobic policies and practices domestically, as well as military intervention internationally. For example, corporate news outlets have unanimously sided with Israel by slanting their coverage to justify or mitigate the realities of its human rights abuses against Muslims in Palestine. Critics in the independent media have noted that terms such as genocide are applied elsewhere in the world such as in Guatemala, but not for the Palestinians in Gaza, despite the conflict entering its eighth decade. Thus, the corporate press maintains public support for US foreign policy in the Middle East by promoting domestic Islamophobia.

US foreign policy in the Middle East is largely shaped by US dependence on natural resources from the region and on the resulting geopolitical alliances. US dependence specifically on foreign oil has increased since the twentieth century, making it the world’s largest consumer of foreign oil. Currently, the US imports 44 percent of its oil to maintain its consumer economy. Because several Middle Eastern economies depend on oil consumption levels, the US is vulnerable to the will of oil-producing nations. The largest oil deposits in the world are in the Middle East, which has 55 percent of the
world’s oil reserves. To maintain affordable access to the Middle East oil supply, the US keeps a large military presence in the region; the US has a military base in every Persian Gulf nation except Iran. This strong military presence has resulted in military conflicts with thirteen Middle Eastern nations since 1980. In the 1990s, when the US imposed sanctions on Iraq, it still imported 9 percent of its oil from the country. Though US foreign policy is largely dependent upon support from the American public, much of this domestic support is not tied to the overt need for resources in the region, but rather to the fear engendered in a post-9/11 world coupled with irrational xenophobia of Islam.

In February 2015, the Obama administration hosted a three-day “Summit on Countering Violent Extremism” to address violent episodes around the globe. The White House released a statement in January that focused on recent attacks carried out by Muslim groups in Paris, Ottawa, Sydney, and elsewhere. Following the press release, many high-profile Muslim organizations, non-Muslim religious groups, and civil rights
advocates criticized the administration’s tendency to “single out American Muslim communities” in its anti-extremist strategies. Obama and other world leaders tried to quell the controversy by insisting that the US and its allies were not “at war with Islam.”

Despite claiming to support multiculturalism and inclusion, the corporate news reinforces the public perception that Muslims are inherently violent and brutal savages through inequitable coverage of Muslim and white American violence. For example, in February 2015, three Muslim American students were shot and killed by Craig Stephen Hicks, a white neighbor in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Major corporate news outlets such as CNN, the New York Times, and Fox News initially remained silent on the attack and President Obama waited two days to issue an official statement. No corporate coverage labeled the triple homicide as an act of domestic terrorism—rather, Hicks was referred to as a lone loon. The corporate coverage of white shooters such as Hicks differs from the coverage of Muslim shooters. Muslim attacks are often portrayed as part of some larger act of terrorism while whites are “lone loons.” A month before the shooting in Chapel Hill, the satirical French magazine Charlie Hebdo was attacked in Paris by three radical Muslims for its portrayal of Muhammad. The response around the world was a massive march condemning jihadist violence and terrorism, which have almost universally become conflated. Protester signs and social media hashtags trended the phrase “Je Suis Charlie” (I am Charlie), and marchers chanted for liberty, tolerance, and coexistence. Nothing similar happened for the Chapel Hill or other Muslim victims when they experienced attacks at the hands of whites. In fact, a father of two of the North Carolina victims remarked that “if a Muslim commits a crime, it’s on the news 24/7 for two months. When we are executed in numbers, it’s on the news for seconds.”

The inequitable points of view in corporate news outlets spread Islamophobia and absolve whites for similar behavior. For example, on February 27, 2015, Pooja Podugu from the Harvard Political Review published a media analysis of international terrorist attacks (executed by Islamic groups). The report found that the corporate media gave less coverage, if any, when Muslims were the victims of violent epi-
For example, in December 2014, nine Taliban members killed 145 Muslims, 132 of which were children, but the story was covered only for a few days. Similarly, and weeks before the *Charlie Hebdo* media frenzy, the Baga Massacre of January 3, 2015, saw 2,000 Muslims murdered, but the story garnered little to no corporate news attention. The corporate media’s decision to ignore white violence and Muslim deaths but sensationalize and cover Muslim murder ad nauseam is especially egregious considering that from 1970 to 2012, only 60 of 2,400 terrorist attacks in America were carried out by Muslims—approximately 2.5 percent of all attacks.

Despite the lack of evidence of logical fears of Islamic terrorism, the corporate media spew Islamophobic coverage to garner support for US military interventions. For example, in June 2014, a group of Islamists, formerly known as “al-Qaeda in Iraq,” called for the formation of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, to be ruled by a single, absolute religious and political leader. ISIS was initially a faction of al-Qaeda, some of whose members were trained and funded by the US. However, by 2014, they were challenging US interests and power in the Middle East. The talk of war in the corporate news increased especially after the release of ISIS videos that documented journalists’ beheadings. The corporate media framed the discussion of using airstrikes against ISIS as an absolute rather than a debate. From September 7 to 21, 2014, the media research group FAIR examined the corporate news outlets and *PBS News Hour* discussions concerning the US response to ISIS. Only six people out of 205 opposed US military interventions and 125 directly stated that they favor intervention.

The corporate coverage of ISIS and the question of intervention demonstrate that the media act as a megaphone for US leaders’ foreign policy. They use their dominance over the airwaves and digital technologies to spread Islamophobia, which engenders public support for intervention. Although the focus on radical Muslims is overstated and sensationalized by the corporate press, it does have real implications. It has created an environment in which Muslims, and those mistaken for Muslims, have to live in fear of aggressive assault or death at the hands of the paranoid American populace.
The Race to Racism in Post-Racial America

In the previous year, Americans were glued to their television screens as images of race, police violence, poverty, crime, protests, and rioting converged in cities across the US. The “justifiable homicides” of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, erupted in politically charged protests and public debates across the country. The corporate coverage of these killings and their aftermaths blamed African-Americans for their own deaths while justifying police behavior and excusing whites for the same crime.

This coverage distracts from the racism built into the legal system and results in public sympathy for state violence. Bill O’Reilly of Fox News and former New York City mayor and Fox News contributor Rudolph Giuliani sustained this narrative, arguing that the true victims of these protests are the police. Giuliani went so far as to say, in defense of police, “It is untrue. It’s like Soviet propaganda. The police are not racist. There is not a systemic problem with police racism.” The statistics say otherwise: white Americans who engage in similar
behaviors as people of color are twenty-one times less likely to be shot by police.120 Annually, 1,500 people die from law enforcement–related deaths and not all are guilty.121 Many of these victims tend to be people of color. Furthermore, Americans are nine times more likely to be killed by a police officer than a terrorist.122

While there are numerous examples of police killings of unarmed men and women of color in 2014–15, two stand out in terms of media coverage. In August 2014, Michael Brown, a young unarmed African-American man, was shot dead in Ferguson, Missouri, by police officer Darren Wilson following an alleged convenience store robbery.123 In November 2014, Wilson was acquitted by a grand jury of any wrongdoing. In Baltimore, Maryland, on April 12, 2015, police stopped Freddie Gray, an African-American male, for looking at them and then running. After being apprehended “without force or incident,” police removed a switchblade knife from him and put him in the back of a police van.124 Amid numerous stops by the van, Gray’s head was beaten into the van, causing his neck to break and leading to his death.125 Immediately thereafter, community members, likely inspired by the outcome of the investigation in Ferguson, took to the streets to demand justice.

**DOUBLE STANDARDS**

Corporate media tend to blame victims of color for their own deaths while justifying police behavior and excusing whites for similar actions. For example, Fox News and the New York Times degraded Brown with phrases such as “bad guy” and “no angel.”126 Weeks after the Brown shooting, the New York Times asked citizens to give police the benefit of the doubt.127 More broadly, Fox News host Bill O’Reilly blamed “family culture,” not police, for the death.128 He further argued that “blacks commit more murders than whites . . . which is why juries give police the benefit of the doubt when there is an incident in the black community.”129 However, O’Reilly did not mention that between the years 1991 and 2008, crimes committed by African-Americans declined by over half. In cities such as New York and Chicago, where African-American crime is most prominent, the rate has fallen by close to 80 percent since the 1960s.130 In fact, 87 percent of mass shootings in the US are committed by whites aged thirteen to fifty-six.131
Other voices at Fox News, like psychiatrist Dr. Keith Ablow, went as far as to accuse Michael Brown’s stepfather of being the kind of man who would have “influenced Michael Brown to lose his life.”\textsuperscript{132} Giuliani argued that black people should take responsibility for the police killings because “white police officers wouldn’t be there if you weren’t killing each other.”\textsuperscript{133} Geraldo Rivera justified the Brown shooting because Brown was suspected of robbing a convenience store—a crime not punishable by death.\textsuperscript{134} Eventually, Fox News coverage relied on manufactured justifications for Brown’s killing, including a fictitious report that Brown broke Wilson’s eye socket.\textsuperscript{135}

In fact, the trend seems to be that the corporate media take the word of the police over their African-American victims without researching the claims. Another clear example of this took place in South Carolina on April 4, 2015, after the shooting of Walter Scott, an unarmed African-American man. The media bought the narrative of the police officer who shot him; he fully justified his own actions until a video surfaced proving that the police totally fabricated the story, and in fact likely murdered Scott, shooting him in the back as he fled.\textsuperscript{136} The existence of this later video evidence proves why it is necessary that it be lawful for citizens to film police in the line of duty, as accountability cannot be assured simply through the word of the state.

In contrast, when whites commit crimes, even shootings, they receive more sympathetic coverage by corporate media than African-Americans who are the victims of police shootings. For example, news outlets ran headlines claiming that Michael Brown had “struggled with police” in his past.\textsuperscript{137} Yet James Egan Holmes, a twenty-four-year-old white doctoral student was referred to as a “brilliant science student” after his 2012 mass shooting at a Colorado movie theater.\textsuperscript{138} Similarly, in 2014, Elliot Rodger, who was the son of a Hollywood director, killed six people and injured fourteen others with his car before committing suicide in Isla Vista, California.\textsuperscript{139} The corporate media dug deep into the killer’s history, but unlike the coverage of Brown, the corporate media did not make a racial, cultural, or regional generality for what caused Rodger’s behavior. Instead they relied on soft language, naming him the “kissless virgin” and “isolated son” coming from a “twisted world.”\textsuperscript{140} Similarly, sympathetic
coverage was given to Amy Bishop. Bishop, a white female, was a former college professor of biology who killed three and wounded three others in a 2010 shooting. The corporate media covered her backstory as “tragic” because she had been denied tenure at her college a year earlier. They pondered her motives and wondered what could have gone wrong. This reflective approach is rarely afforded to nonwhite people who commit similar or even far lesser crimes, if any at all.

Unfair Coverage of “Riots” and “Celebrations”

Rather than address the roots of police violence against minority communities, the corporate media focused on the portion of protesters who turned violent. Citizens protested peacefully, and in a few cases violently, throughout the world in the wake of last year’s police killings of African-Americans. The nature of these protests was often exaggerated by outlets such as CNN, which tended to justify violent police response without noting the role police play in creating that violence. However, in reality, the police have been complicit in creating public violence. For example, in December 2014, under-
cover officers randomly pulled guns on protesters and acted as provocateurs in Oakland, California, a development ignored by corporate media. Similarly, after Gray’s death in Baltimore, violence erupted once police showed up in riot gear and blocked streets.

With selective violence erupting in Baltimore, the corporate media jumped at the opportunity to bring images of the sensationalistic violence to viewers rather than the actions of thousands of peaceful protesters. In an interview on CNN, anchor Wolf Blitzer demanded that a protester denounce what Blitzer framed as protester violence. Instead, the protester noted that the press was hypocritical for condemning protester violence, and not the police violence that provoked public reaction. While Blitzer saw protesters as violent actors, CNN anchor Erin Burnett referred to them as “thugs.” When MSNBC tried to get Baltimore activist Danielle Williams to admit that violence accomplished nothing, she reminded MSNBC that there was no national attention during the peaceful protests because the corporate media only showed up when the protests turned violent. Fox News was targeted for its perceived bias as protesters shouted and attempted to stop Geraldo Rivera’s live coverage, which sensationalized the demonstrations as mass looting. A Baltimore congresswoman lambasted Fox while in an interview with them for only focusing on looters.

Not only did the corporate media frame protests as violent, they even attacked those who protested peacefully. In late 2014, Fox News verbally attacked the St. Louis Rams players for silently protesting police violence as they entered the football field with their hands raised (a reference to “Hands up, don’t shoot,” relating to yet another incident of the death of an unarmed African-American at the hands of police in New York, Eric Garner). Fox News host Bill O’Reilly claimed the players were not “smart enough to know what they’re doing.”

The very same acts that corporate media decry as rioting by people of color are framed in a very different way when committed by whites. Violence against property as part of “celebrations” surrounding sporting or other public events is not held to the same standard as when executed by African-Americans. For example, in 2013, surfers descended upon Huntington Beach, California, for a day of surfing that turned into rioting and looting. Most of those involved were
In fact, in 2014, *New York* magazine published a collection of photos showing whites rioting and committing acts of violence in celebration of sporting events and other relatively trivial matters. For example, a 2014 football game in Denver and a 2012 World Series in San Francisco resulted in large groups of individuals taking to the streets, lighting fires, and destroying property with little police action. Similarly, in New Hampshire, college students fought for their right to party at the Keene Pumpkin Festival, smashing windows, slashing tires, overturning dumpsters, and hurling liquor bottles; CNN called them “unruly,” but no one was called a “thug” like in Baltimore or Ferguson. According to the corporate media, these events were unfortunate, but they never received the negative attention reserved for events in Ferguson or Baltimore.

The corporate press did not widely deride these events or denounce white “family culture” as the culprit, like O’Reilly had with African-Americans. In fact, these examples undermine Fox’s argument that “the police would not be there if you were not committing crimes.” Further, no one was asked to denounce the acts as part of “white culture.” The message of the corporate media is clear: if you are an African-American protesting civil liberty violations, you are a thug; if you are white and engaged in wanton public property destruction or legal violations, you may only be letting off steam or celebrating a recent sporting event or festival.

**CONCLUSION**

The press has the power to stimulate people to clean up the environment, prevent nuclear proliferation, force crooked politicians out of office, reduce poverty, provide quality health care for all people, and even to save the lives of millions of people as it did in Ethiopia in 1984. But instead we are using it to promote sex, violence, and sensationalism and to line the pockets of already wealthy media moguls.

—Dr. Carl Jensen

Carl Jensen invited students, scholars, and community members to not only examine the news critically, but to also examine themselves.
and their media habits. Despite the criticism Jensen leveled at the corporate media, he did it constructively and as a former newsman, with an eye on improving the quality of professional journalism. Where individuals get their information and the manner in which it is framed impacts the decisions people make politically, socially, and economically. Jensen’s contributions and the subsequent work of Project Censored have proven that the corporate press works to obfuscate reality and reduce viewers’ knowledge through trivial stories and disinformation campaigns. To carry on Jensen’s legacy of media literacy education is to continue giving citizens knowledge and agency for positive change that affects us all.

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**Notes**


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12. Ibid.


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34. Ibid.


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61. Ibid.


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