CHAPTER 2

Censored Déjà Vu
Strolling Down Memory Hole Lane

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“And if all others accepted the lie...if all records told the same tale—then the lie passed into history and became truth. Who controls the past...controls the future; who controls the present controls the past.”

—George Orwell, 1984

Each year, Project Censored reviews previously underreported and censored stories from our research and publications in an effort to learn if the corporate media have improved their coverage. Sometimes there are pleasant surprise discoveries of previous stories highlighted by Project Censored being picked up by mass media outlets, which is certainly something we laud. However, the majority of stories highlighted by Project Censored have continued to be ignored by the corporate media. It’s as if some of these stories have been tossed into what George Orwell, in his dystopian novel 1984, described as “the memory hole”—where information past or present that went against the party line could be disappeared into incinerators, literally filling the dustbins of history. This chapter is dedicated to following up on the Project’s past Top Censored Stories, charting their significance, past to present, and analyzing whether or not they have received the attention they ultimately deserve. In short, we’re emp-
tying those dustbins and sifting through what’s been overlooked or disappeared as we stroll down memory hole lane.

We decided to take a broader historical view with the Déjà Vu installment this year. In honor of the 40th anniversary of the Project, we thought it would be fitting to go back over the past forty years and choose a handful of our most interesting and timely #1 Censored stories and update them. We consulted our panel of esteemed judges, who voted on what they thought were among the most significant top stories in the Project’s history. We selected the top six #1 stories that received the most votes. These include:

1. Myth of Black Progress (1977)
5. No Habeas Corpus for “Any Person” (2008)
6. Ocean Acidification Increasing at Unprecedented Rate (2015)

We reflect upon these stories to see if the corporate media has bothered to report about them, and analyze what has or hasn’t changed in terms of coverage as well as the vital issues under review. For each story, we provide an original summary, followed by a current update.

We begin in 1977, just after the founding of Project Censored, with “Myth of Black Progress.” This article countered the narrative of black social and economic progress in the US two decades after the judicial and legislative outlawing of Jim Crow segregation. This reporting is further underscored by the recent discovery of President Richard Nixon staffer John Ehrlichman’s remarks that the war on drugs was intentionally created, in part, to discredit the black power movement and demonize the African American community, while disrupting the actions of those involved, criminalizing selective cultural behaviors, and resulting in the mass incarceration of vast numbers of African Americans. These historical patterns of institutional racism remain four decades later. Despite the election in 2008 of an African American president in the US, the rise of massive social movements like Black Lives Matter, created in response to police brutality and
racism in the criminal justice system, indicate that the “Myth of Black Progress” is as relevant in the 21st century as it was in the 1970s.

Another prescient article, from 1979, detailed what was deemed the “Corporate Crime of the Century.” This article lays out the long span of corporate brutality used in the pursuit of maximizing profits. This connects to another story from 2000, about how “Multinational Corporations Profit from International Brutality.” That trend has persisted to the present day, as many corporations, including corporate media, place more importance on profits than on the people whose interests they claim to serve.

A recurring theme among Censored stories is the growing wealth inequality both in the US and worldwide. In 2005, Project Censored’s top story was “Wealth Inequality in 21st Century Threatens Economy and Democracy,” and in 2016 a related article topped the list, “Half of Global Wealth Owned by the One Percent,” based on an Oxfam report that showed the gap between rich and poor ever-increasing. Only sixty-two people, fifty-three of them men, control as much wealth as half of the global population—some 3.6 billion people. Not only is the issue of growing inequality still with us, and worsening, it is still a story that manages to escape the attention of the corporate press and major mass media outlets.

The 1980s marked a time of major shifts in media consolidation. The late media scholar Ben Bagdikian, in his book The Media Monopoly, correctly predicted that there would come a day when the bulk of corporate media would be controlled by six entities. It was the Project’s top story in 1987, “The Information Monopoly,” and again in 1996 a story on media consolidation topped the list, “Telecommunications Deregulation: Closing Up America’s ‘Marketplace of Ideas.’” Lo and behold, keeping that marketplace of ideas open to all is an ongoing challenge in the present. Bagdikian rightly warned that shrinking ownership and more corporate power falls in line with overall total control by the few of the many, and in this case, that means control of what news We the People can hear, read, and see. That this particular topic is consistently underreported or ignored by the corporate press should surprise no one—among the many things they don’t cover with much rigor, their own corporate ascendency would certainly come first.
In 2008, Project Censored reported on the lessening of habeas corpus rights, and the current update on “No Habeas Corpus for ‘Any Person’” notes that, although there have been some court challenges, Barack Obama’s administration has done little to restore the rights that were stripped away under President George W. Bush. In fact, through Obama’s drone strikes, kill lists, and continued assaults on journalists, whistleblowers, and other civic activists, one might argue that not only has Obama not restored or protected due process rights, he has in fact continued to erode them.

The last of the top Censored stories we look at in this chapter is from Censored 2015, “Ocean Acidification Increasing at Unprecedented Rate.” While this story highlights the consequences of human disregard for other living things, it also offers ways in which, if we cared to, we could address this problem and other problems related to climate change. This would involve redistribution of resources and acknowledgment that many of us need to scale back on our consumption both as individuals and as institutions. Given the significance of climate change, and the evidence supporting it, one wonders if the corporate media will ever get around to providing the kind of news reporting that could very well contribute to motivating humanity to save our shared home—planet Earth.

This brings us full circle, in some ways, back to the few controlling the many and the lack of information readily published and made easily available about the real injustices plaguing our world. But a well-informed society can make a difference. As the founder of Project Censored, Carl Jensen, wrote nearly thirty years ago,

Indeed the media can make a difference if they want to. They have the power to stimulate the people to clean up the environment; to prevent nuclear proliferation; to force crooked politicians out of office; to reduce poverty; to create a truly equitable society; and, as we have seen, to literally save the lives of millions of human beings. And this is why we must look to, prod, and support a free, open, and aggressive press. This is the real, bottom line issue. For it is the press which determines which issues go on the national agenda for discussion and thought and which don’t.8
Here, Jensen reminds us that vibrant independent media is not only a seed for change, but a prime vehicle for civic action. Project Censored continues to advocate and agitate for a truly free press in that vein forty years later.

1.

Censored 1977: Myth of Black Progress

SUMMARY: It took a power blackout and the looting of New York City for America to rediscover its ghettos. Just like the time before, it took a massive dose of urban violence to draw attention to the underclass. Though the times have changed, the grievances remain the same. The poverty, disenfranchisement, unemployment, and drug abuse that were a national scandal in the 1960s have only worsened since then.

Half the black population is less than twenty-four years old, and for them the future promises little. Judging by current economic indices, one out of ten young black and brown people in the ghettos will never have a job that provides them with a livelihood or enables them to support a family. This is the human dimension of a black teenage unemployment rate of 40 percent.

Even black people with steady employment are losing ground to their white counterparts. The Department of Labor reports a growing gap between white and black income, with the wages of white workers increasing twice as fast as those of black workers. Ninety-seven percent of all professional jobs are still held by whites, and this has not changed since 1969.

Young black people, particularly in urban areas, are disproportionately affected by policing and incarceration. In New York City today, the number of black youths under 16 who have been arrested is almost ten times what it was in 1950.

“Redlining,” the refusal to rent or sell accommodations to particular racial or ethnic groups within specific geographic areas, in combination with financial institutions’ discriminatory lending practices, have sealed the fate of most black communities. In contrast to the relative mobility of the white working class, resulting in so-called “white
flight,” the inner city has become the exclusive preserve of those who cannot afford to leave.

In the 1960s the mass media, following urban uprisings across the country, began to hire black journalists to cover the rise of the Black Power movement. The contributions of black journalists were crucial in articulating the struggles and perspectives of black communities coping with continuing oppression following the Civil Rights Movement and the assassinations of prominent leaders. Today, the role of black journalists in the corporate media has diminished. Fewer opportunities are granted to cover the normal aspects of black life or of the continuing struggle for equality in the day-to-day routine, with black journalists instead frequently expected to fill a tokenistic role within a largely white narrative structure.

Media have failed to see black struggles as an ongoing story and have instead chosen to focus on black communities exclusively for reports of crime or large scale urban violence. This has meant that the social and economic inequality affecting black Americans remains among the most critical Project Censored stories.

UPDATE: Thirty-seven years later, a July 2014 phone poll of 1,009 adults conducted by CBS found that almost eight out of ten polled believed there had been real progress in getting rid of racial discrimination in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Only 19 percent of those polled said there hadn’t been much progress. However, when that nearly 80 percent majority was broken down along racial lines, a clear divide was evident. Only 59 percent of black Americans believed real progress had been made, compared to 82 percent of whites. Forty-one percent of black Americans polled believed that there was still a lot of discrimination against black Americans, versus 14 percent of whites who believed the same. Sixty-three percent of whites polled believed that black and white Americans had an equal chance of “getting ahead.” Only 46 percent of black Americans agreed, while another 46 percent said that whites had an advantage.

The ACLU’s page on racial profiling explains that “more than 240 years of slavery and ninety years of legalized racial segregation have led to systemic profiling of blacks in traffic and pedestrian stops.”
According to Ed Stetzer of Christianity Today, in 2013, “Black Americans are incarcerated at nearly six times the rate of whites. If current trends continue, one in three black males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime.” Stetzer goes on to cite the NAACP’s Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, which includes the statistic that black Americans constitute nearly 1 million of the 2.3 million people incarcerated in the United States, while black Americans make up less than 15 percent of the overall population.

That black Americans are incarcerated at a far higher rate than their white counterparts is indicative not only of a two-tiered justice system, but of a new form of slavery. In both state and federal prisons a majority of the inmates were convicted of nonviolent crimes, many for petty drug offenses. The so-called “War on Drugs,” which might be more aptly referred to as the “War on Minorities,” has drastically increased the prison population in the past half-century, and has disproportionately targeted black people.
A prime example of such discriminatory enforcement and sentencing is the federal law that “. . . stipulates five years’ imprisonment without possibility of parole for possession of 5 grams of crack . . . and 10 years for possession of less than 2 ounces of rock-cocaine . . .” whereas “[a] sentence of 5 years for cocaine powder requires possession of 500 grams—100 times more than the quantity of rock cocaine for the same sentence.” While crack and cocaine are both derived from the same plant, cocaine, being a much more expensive substance, has tended to be bought and consumed by middle- to upper-class white people, while crack has remained more prevalent among lower-class, African American communities. Despite comparable levels of drug use among whites, black communities have been disproportionately targeted by antidrug enforcement.

The rise of the black prison population is directly correlated to the rise of the prison industrial complex, as prison corporations have routinely lobbied for policies that incarcerate more people and keep them locked up for longer. As of 2014, the Centre for Research on Globalization reported that “at least 37 states have legalized the contracting of prison labor to private corporations that mount their operations inside state prisons.” This system of contracting out prison labor was created after the Civil War in order to maintain a steady supply of what was essentially slave labor and continues today on a scale comparable to the plantation system of the old South with the drastic expansion of the prison industrial complex.

A study conducted in 2015 by the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, Forward Together, and Research Action Design, and reported on by the Guardian, found that “on average families with an imprisoned relative paid $13,607 in court-related costs. In addition, one in five families who participated in the study reported that they had to take out a loan to cover these costs. One in five families were unable to afford housing expenses due to the loss of income from their loved one’s incarceration. Two out of three families had difficulty meeting basic needs as a result of their loved one’s conviction and incarceration. 83 percent of family members primarily responsible for these costs were women.”

Five decades have passed since the era of legal segregation, yet the divide between black and white Americans has grown even wider. In
“America’s Racial Divide, Charted,” written during the wake of the Ferguson protests and the death of Michael Brown in 2014, Irwin, Miller and Sanger-Katz examine the startling statistics. Unemployment has remained higher amongst black Americans—regardless of education—than amongst whites for decades, and the gap between the two has remained constant. The racial divide in higher education increased from 10 percent in 1970 to 17 percent in 2012. “In 1983, the median weekly pay of white workers was 18.4 percent higher than that of black workers. Three decades later, the premium had risen to 21.6 percent.” While the poverty rate amongst black Americans has fallen, it was about the only example of positive change in the article. As a matter of fact, the wealth gap between white and black Americans has outstripped the wage gap, as white Americans have on average 6.1 times greater wealth than their African American counterparts. In 2015 the numbers remain demonstrative of the myth of black progress. As reported in Breitbart by Caroline May in June of 2015, “The unemployment rate for African Americans was nearly twice the national average and more than double the unemployment rate for whites last month, according to new jobs data released . . . by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.”

Still more grim are the racial disparities revealed by the statistics of deaths at the hands of police officers or while in police custody. Mint-Press News did two stories on this subject in 2015, “776 People Killed by Police So Far in 2015, 161 of Them Unarmed” and the follow-up report “Over 1,000 People Killed by Police Since the Beginning of 2015.” Both use data compiled by the Guardian in a database called The Counted, which tracks police killings throughout the United States. “The Counted database is the most comprehensive information available on police killings, since no US government agency maintains a similar listing.” As of May 2, 2016, police have killed 347 people in the United States this year, and of those killed, 75 were African Americans. From January 2015 to May 2016, white Americans have died at the hands of police officers more often than African Americans in terms of simple numbers. “However, activists like the members of the Black Lives Matter movement argue that police kill blacks at a rate disproportionate to their total percentage of the population—an assertion supported by The Guardian’s statistics. Police
killed almost five black people per every million black residents of the US, compared with about 2 per million for both white and hispanic victims.”

We have the numbers. Corporate media choose to focus on isolated stories instead of the systematic oppression of black Americans through both the criminal justice and educational systems in this country. This is no accident, either. A host of American corporations, including but not limited to the Boeing Company and AT&T, profit greatly from the prison industrial complex, in turn benefitting from the discriminatory policies that keep black prison populations high. According to LaMarche, writing for the Nation, “For a democracy movement to be worthy of the name, it must recognize the fact that the criminal-justice system is a barrier to the full exercise of citizenship for many marginalized Americans.” These systems need an overhaul, and the American people need to look long and hard at the racist narratives that surround them before they can expect Black Progress to be more than just a myth.

SOURCES:

2.
Censored 1979: The Corporate Crime of the Century

SUMMARY: In November 1979, *Mother Jones*, one of America’s leading investigative journals, devoted nearly an entire issue to what it called “The Corporate Crime of the Century.” Several aspects of this story have been dealt with in previous Project Censored efforts. But the November *Mother Jones* issue revealed, for the first time, the full scope of American corporate exploitation of Third World countries.

The mass media have yet to explore and expose the international tragedy of what is sometimes called “dumping.” While “dumping” may not be technically illegal, it is a widespread practice that endangers the health, lives, and environment of millions of people outside the United States. It is done by American businesses in the name of profit.

Manufacturers of products that are restricted or banned from use in the US can legally export and sell them to countries with fewer health protections. The government allows the export of dangerous chemicals, toxic pesticides, and defective medical drugs and devices, to name just a few such hazardous US products. The US Food and Drug Administration allows drug manufacturers to export banned drugs, stale-dated drugs, and even unapproved new drugs.

Profiting from products difficult or illegal to sell in the US is not limited to pesticides and drugs. As the US nuclear industry encountered difficulties in selling reactors to wary American communities, it turned to sales in countries where dissent can be silenced and political payoffs can bring quick results.

There is an ironic footnote to the story of corporate exploitation of Third World nations. Exporting poisonous pesticides to developing nations, for example, has what author-researcher Leslie Ware called, in *Audubon* magazine, “a boomerang effect.” In reference to dumping pesticides in such countries as Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Ecuador, Ware points out that “[t]heir use is banned here, but hazardous poisons manufactured by American companies come back to haunt us on the food we import from developing nations.” Ten percent of all imported foods (such as coffee, bananas, and tomatoes) are contaminated with illegal levels of pesticide resi-
dues. Much of this pesticide contamination comes from America's own exports.

A curious addendum to the report on corporate “dumping” suggests that profit isn’t necessarily always the overriding issue for the mass media outlets; rather, it may also matter from where that profit comes. *Mother Jones* submitted an advertisement to *Time* magazine that displayed the “Corporate Crime of the Century” cover. *Time* refused to run the ad because, according to *Mother Jones*, some of the advertising copy “offended” them. Or perhaps it offended some of their higher paying advertising clients.

The failure of the mass media to investigate and expose “The Corporate Crime of the Century” and its future repercussions (potentially more serious than repulsive bananas) on the American people qualified this as the top *Censored* story of 1979.

*Censored 2000: Multinational Corporations Profit from International Brutality*

**SUMMARY:** The Project Censored top story from 2000, “Multinational Corporations Profit from International Brutality,” covered the extent of huge transnational corporations’ investments and collaborations with countries that violate human rights. Through these business ventures, governments gain the financial means and resources to suppress political dissent and violate individual rights. Though corporations claim that through “constructive engagement” their presence will improve human rights, those rights have been drastically curtailed as corporate investments have funded repressive governments in India, Burma, and Turkmenistan, among many others.

The Internet has been a major instrument in revealing the unethical profit-driven agenda of corporations in continuing dealings with abusive governments. Corporations are aware of the power of perception, and push an environmental, fair trade, and human rights-supporting stance. In July 2000, multibillion-dollar corporations such as Royal Dutch Shell and BP Amoco joined with governments and United Nations agencies to form the UN Global Compact, the world’s largest corporate sustainability initiative. The compact has been criticized for setting down principles for human rights, labor,
and the environment without taking any steps toward their enforce-
ment. It allows companies to “blue-wash” their image while still vio-
lating human rights.

UPDATE: Mass media outlets have shed some light on the practices of green-washing and blue-washing and have begun to highlight efforts by advocates for corporate accountability. During the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference held in Paris, the New York Times reported on a small contingency of demonstrators who used negative advertising to publicly shame Volkswagen for a green-marketing campaign that contradicted their actual practices. While it is commendable for corporations to make commitments that affect meaningful change, mass media outlets have a powerful opportunity to hold them to task. We do see a trend of corporate media balancing the claims of a company with how they go about initiating and taking responsibility. The problem with this strategy is that it only shames the company and does not hold governments responsible for their share.

In the case of state-owned companies, accountability is especially important as they often operate with disregard for human rights. Reporting for Foreign Policy, Michael Hobbes writes, “In Angola, the state-owned oil company, Sonangol, is also the government regulator, responsible for policing conditions in its own sector.” In Madagascar, the government tried to lease half the country’s arable land to the South Korean company Daewoo Logistics without even asking for payment. Sarah Labowitz, cofounder and codirector of New York University’s Stern Center for Business and Human Rights, calls this the “denominator problem.” Labowitz points out that many of the garment factories in Bangladesh are owned by politicians, the same people in charge of inspecting them.

These obvious conflicts of interest remain a huge problem facing the movement to bring multinational corporations to task for their abuses. The difficulty, as pointed out by Hobbes, is that these state-owned companies defer questions about human rights to the realm of diplomacy while happily filling the voids left by companies that have been pressured to change their practices or leave. “Every leverage mechanism we have, this entire architecture we’ve built, is
based on chasing companies back to jurisdictions where regulators, customers, and civil society have the power to punish them.” The problem is that the corporations committing human rights violations operate in a void of accountability. Hobbes continues, “these companies aren’t subject to any transnational regulatory mechanisms. They don’t have to report their activities abroad, and they can’t be taken to court in their home jurisdictions.”

The world’s largest oil and gas companies seem to be using language alone to convince us of their good intentions, and we rely heavily on the media to validate such claims. When taken to task by mass media, corporate green-washing becomes a less effective tool, and state-run companies may at least be called out for their conflicts of interest. There are, however, many examples of human rights abuses that deserve to be examined and have yet to see prosecution.
Corporate media have failed to cover the continuing role of multinational corporations in supporting human rights abuses. In addition, the US courts have failed to hold them accountable for complicity in these violations under the Alien Tort Statute (ATS), part of the Judiciary Act of 1789, which since 1980 has been interpreted to allow non-US citizens to file lawsuits in US federal courts for violations of international law committed outside the US. Mass media failed to research or cover allegations made against Royal Dutch Shell for its complicity with the Nigerian government in extrajudicial killings, torture, and unlawful detainment of Nigerians. Independent news sources have covered the incredible consequences of not holding corporations liable for such egregious abuses.

Corporate media outlets have also failed to cover the human rights abuse case against ExxonMobil and its Indonesian affiliate company. The now fifteen-year case was first brought against ExxonMobil by Indonesians who sought to hold ExxonMobil accountable for human rights abuses committed by military security forces in their direct employment. Corporate media did not report that US courts ruled the case could go forth in 2014 and that, for the first time, corporations could be prosecuted for human rights violations on international soil. Mineral resources have increased the presence of mining companies in Mexico, the Philippines, Guatemala, and Peru, which has fueled government-sanctioned violence as they attempt to either protect resources or move locals off land for corporate mining. Dozens of companies, including Unocal, Ford, and IBM, have been at the receiving end of lawsuits under the ATS for aiding and abetting human rights abuses in Myanmar, apartheid South Africa, and elsewhere, yet none of these cases were thoroughly examined in the corporate media (even though some of the companies settled out of court). Their abuse of human rights went largely unreported. That is, until June 20 of this year when the Supreme Court found in favor of IBM and Ford. Several corporate and establishment media then suddenly discovered the matter, including Reuters, Fortune, and the Associated Press.

Another increasing problem with the recent rise of digital technologies is the cooperation of governments and technology companies in designing infrastructure to censor, surveil, and control citizens. Technology companies profit from selling their programs to oppressive
governments. The Electronic Frontier Foundation brought attention
to the role of Cisco Systems, a powerful US networking company, in
facilitating human rights abuses in China by designing the Internet
surveillance system “Golden Shield” with a module designed to iden-
tify, locate, and prosecute practitioners of Falun Gong. Cisco denies
civil liability because selling “internet infrastructure” is regulated and
protected under US export laws. Major tech company Hewlett Packard
owns EDS Israel, now known as HP Enterprise Services, which pro-
vides the Israeli government with the Basel System, the automated bio-
nmetric access control system that is installed in checkpoints in Gaza
and the occupied West Bank. Increasingly, companies are providing
oppressive regimes with the technology needed to cut off Internet
access and communications, as well as to target dissenters.

A University of Toronto program called Citizen Lab identified
that Blue Coat Systems, a security software company, had dual-use
devices in dozens of countries, including Syria, Iran, and Sudan.
Though these applications are mainly for securing and maintaining
networks, they can be abused by restricting access to information
and recording private communications. Cutting off Internet com-
munications has been increasing in countries embroiled in civil
conflict, following a trend of censorship to silence or stop demon-
strators. In 2013, Sudan experienced a total Internet blackout three
days after violent protests over rising oil prices, which escalated to a
push to oust the current president. The previous year, Egypt, Syria,
and Libya experienced Internet blackouts likewise coinciding with
political conflicts. Due to the huge scale of these blackouts, it is
likely corporations controlling telecommunications actively partici-
pated in this censorship. The surveillance industry brings in from
$3–5 billion per year, and corporations greatly profit from selling to
repressive regimes, directly enabling them to enact further violence
upon the citizenry.

SOURCES:
Claire Barthelemy, “Activists Try to Shame Corporations for ‘Greenwashing’ During the Paris Cli-
Nate Cardozo and Sophia Cope, “Cisco’s Latest Attempt to Dodge Responsibility for Facilitating
3.

Censored 2005: Wealth Inequality in 21st Century Threatens Economy and Democracy

**SUMMARY:** In the late 1970s, wealth inequality, while stabilizing or increasing slightly in other industrialized nations, increased sharply and dramatically in the United States. While it is no secret that such a trend has been taking place, it is rare to see a TV news program announce that the top 1 percent of the US population now owns about a third of the wealth in the country. Discussion of this trend takes place, for the most part, behind closed doors.

During the short boom of the late 1990s, conservative analysts asserted that, yes, the gap between rich and poor was growing, but that incomes for the poor were still increasing over previous levels. Today most economists, regardless of their political persuasion, agree that the data over the last twenty-five to thirty years is unequivocal:


The top 5 percent is capturing an increasingly greater portion of the pie while the bottom 95 percent is clearly losing ground, and the highly touted American middle class is fast disappearing.

According to economic journalist David Cay Johnston, author of *Perfectly Legal*, this trend is not the result of some naturally-occurring, social Darwinist “survival of the fittest.” It is the product of legislative policies carefully crafted and lobbied for by corporations and the super-rich over the past twenty-five years.

New tax shelters in the 1980s shifted the tax burden off of capital and onto labor. As tax shelters rose, the amount of federal revenue coming from corporations fell (from 35 percent during the Eisenhower years to 10 percent in 2002). During the deregulation wave of the 1980s and ’90s, members of Congress passed legislation (often without reading it) that deregulated much of the financial industry. These laws took away, for example, the powerful incentives
for accountants to behave with integrity or for companies to put away a reasonable amount in pension plans for their employees—resulting in the well-publicized (too late) scandals involving Enron, Global Crossing, and others.

A series of reports released in 2003 by the UN and other global economy analysis groups warn that further increases in the imbalance in wealth throughout the world will have catastrophic effects if left unchecked. The balance of poverty is shifting quickly from rural to urban areas as the world’s population moves from the countryside to the city. Currently, almost one-sixth of the world’s population lives in slum-like conditions. The UN warns that unplanned, unsanitary settlements threaten both political and fiscal stability within developing countries, where urban slums are growing faster than expected. UN-Habitat reports that unless governments work to control the current unprecedented spread in urban growth, a third of the world’s population will be slum dwellers within thirty years.

In developing countries, the concentration of key industries profitable to foreign investors requires that people move to cities, while forced privatization of public services strip them of the ability to become stable or move up financially once they arrive. Meanwhile, the strict repayment schedules mandated by the global institutions make it virtually impossible for poor countries to move out from under their burden of debt. “In a form of colonialisation that is probably more stringent than the original, many developing countries have become suppliers of raw commodities to the world, and fall further and further behind,” says one UN analyst. World economists conclude that if enough of the world’s nations reach a point of economic failure, such a situation could collapse the entire global economy.

Censored 2015: Half of Global Wealth Owned by the 1 Percent

SUMMARY: In January 2015, Oxfam International, a nonprofit organization that aims to eliminate poverty, published a report stating that 1 percent of the global population will own more wealth than the rest of the 99 percent combined by 2016. The Oxfam report provided evidence that extreme inequality is not inevitable, but is, in fact, the result of political choices and economic policies established
and maintained by the power elite, wealthy individuals whose strong influence keeps the status quo rigged in their own favor. In addition to reporting the latest figures on global economic inequality and its consequences, the Oxfam study outlined a nine-point plan that governments could adopt in creating new policies to address poverty and economic inequality.

According to the Oxfam report, the proportion of global wealth owned by the 1 percent has increased from 44 percent in 2009 to 48 percent in 2014, and it is projected to reach 50 percent in 2016. In October 2014, a prior Oxfam report, “Even It Up: Time to End Extreme Inequality,” revealed that the number of billionaires worldwide had more than doubled since the 2009 financial crisis, showing that, although those at the top have recovered quickly, the vast majority of the world’s population are far from reaping the benefits of any recent economic recovery. Even more staggering, the world’s richest eighty-five people now hold the same amount of wealth as half the world’s poorest population. “Failure to tackle inequality will leave hundreds of millions trapped in poverty unnecessarily,” the report’s authors warned.

Oxfam calculated that taxing billionaires just 1.5 percent of their wealth “could raise $74 billion a year, enough to fill the annual gaps in funding needed to get every child into school and to deliver health services in the world’s poorest countries.”

Corporate coverage of the two Oxfam reports has been minimal in quantity and problematic in quality. A few corporate television networks, including CNN, CBS, MSNBC, ABC, FOX, and C-SPAN covered Oxfam’s January report, according to the TV News Archive. CNN had the most coverage, with approximately seven broadcast segments; however, these stories were never aired during primetime. At CBS and MSNBC the coverage was similar. Fox also covered the story, once questioning Oxfam’s motives for releasing the report just before the 2015 annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Forbes was consistently critical in its coverage of the two Oxfam reports.

In sum, much of the corporate news coverage was brief, broadcast at odd hours (either late at night or early in the morning when not many people were watching), questioned the report, and/or focused
on Obama’s tax reforms rather than the Oxfam reports’ contents. In contrast with independent news coverage, none of the televised stories addressed details of the Oxfam reports, such as the organization’s nine-point plan for changes. The Oxfam studies received better coverage in the international press at places like the BBC.

**UPDATE:** The corporate media have finally started to report on the ever-widening gap between the richest 1 percent of the world’s population and everyone else. However, such coverage often only scratches the surface of the full scope of economic inequality. Although polls have shown that a majority of Americans believe that the level of income inequality is too high, a study done by economist Ray Fisman found that most politicians, Democrat and Republican alike, are unwilling to shape policies that would reduce inequality. Fisman and his colleagues concluded that “elites were much less willing to sacrifice efficiency for equality than the average American was.” Most policymakers think of programs that benefit the middle and lower classes as a waste of resources.

Since 1981, the number of people living in poverty has increased tremendously. Most mainstream economists attribute income inequality to an increased demand for highly skilled workers in high tech industries. Matt Vidal, a Senior Lecturer in Work and Organisations at King’s College London and editor in chief of *Work in Progress*, studied the economies of Canada, the UK, and the US and found that income inequality had risen almost continuously in the US since the 1970s. In Canada it had been stable for two decades until the 1990s, while inequality in the UK grew faster than in the US until 1990, at which point it has since remained relatively stable. This information complicates the mainstream, skill-biased explanation, and points instead to the culpability of those who shape political and economic policies. According to Vidal, the main causes of income inequality are de-unionization, outsourcing, and the market-determination of wages. These factors have increased the use of part-time and temporary employment, while wages for low-skilled workers have been lowered as much as possible as per market-determination.

Wages for middle- and lower-class workers have not risen to reflect increased productivity or to offset inflation, while those at the top of
the economic food chain have seen their annual income increase at unprecedented rates. In the article “Inequality Against Democracy: 10 Facts about the 0.01 Percent,” Richard Eskow states that between the years 1979 and 2012, “after accounting for inflation, the productivity of the average American worker increased about 85 percent” but “the inflation-adjusted wage of the median worker rose only about 6 percent, and the value of the minimum wage fell 21 percent.” By contrast, in the past forty-some-odd years, the income for the top 1 percent has grown by 275 percent, and CEOs now earn as much as 373 times more than the average American worker. All the while, the costs of housing, higher education, health care, and retirement have risen exponentially. Further compounding the issues of income inequality is the reality that the richest individuals, and corporations, do not pay anywhere near their fair share of taxes.

Many suggest that by simply taxing the wealthiest households, revenues would significantly increase, and investing in the expansion of “wealth-building across the economy” would be a feasible option. According to Lynn Stuart Parramore, without meaningful political change our democracy will continue to be undermined, “social cohesion blown apart, economies destabilized, social mobility stalled, and many other important aspects of our personal and public lives degraded, including our health.”

Journalist Bob Lord has proposed three changes to our system of taxation that would have profound effects in restructuring the economy so that it would work for the many, and not just for the few. First, he suggests an increase to taxation on investment income, which essentially only affects the richest Americans. Second, the income tax rates for the super-rich must be increased considerably. Third, the loopholes in the estate tax system should be eradicated and an increase on the estate tax rate enacted. It has become abundantly clear that, despite what proponents of Reaganomics would like us to believe, granting a low tax burden to corporations and the super-rich does not benefit the middle and lower classes. Furthermore, when the most affluent individuals stash their money in overseas tax-havens, it is obviously impossible for their wealth to “trickle-down” to improve the economy.

On April 3, 2016, the world witnessed one of the biggest data leaks
in history, the Panama Papers, released by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. The US Department of the Treasury received anonymous information that exposed tax evasions by a slew of governments, politicians, celebrities, and private individuals worldwide. The Panama Papers are only one example of how many wealthy people use offshore tax havens in order to reduce, or completely avoid, income taxes. The law firm exposed by the data leak, Mossack Fonseca, is one of the largest providers of offshore services. Law firms that specialize in tax-havens for the super-rich have hindered the economic progress in poor countries like Syria and Uganda. Uganda spent years trying to force Heritage Oil and Gas, a Channel Islands-based business, to pay taxes after selling its assets in Uganda to Tullow Oil, but they refused to do so. Aided by Mossack Fonseca, the company managed to avoid paying $404 million in taxes, until finally legally forced to do so more than four years later. During the period of this large-scale tax evasion, hospitals around the oil field lacked the funds needed to provide even the most basic care. Patients were treated on the hospital floor and were required to bring their own gloves and cotton balls; otherwise they were sent home without receiving care. The $404 million that Heritage Oil and Gas avoided paying represents more than the Ugandan government’s annual health budget. The Panama Papers have provided undeniable proof that some companies and individuals are “extracting more money from an economy without actually adding to the growth,” and the results are often disastrous.

While the Panama Papers do not identify as many US offenders, there have been other exposés that detail citizens of the United States who have clearly evaded paying taxes. Gabriel Zucman’s book, *The Hidden Wealth of Nations: The Scourge of Tax Havens*, reports that “US citizens have at least $1.2 trillion stashed offshore, costing $200 billion a year worldwide in lost tax revenue from wealthy individuals.” This information is significant because it provides the 99 percent with indisputable evidence of the 1 percent’s illegal activities, and from this basis we can demand that our governments take action and hold these companies and individuals accountable.

With the US presidential election upon us, it is troubling to confront the fact that Donald Trump is now the Republican nominee.
His business practices are on par with many of those exposed by the Panama Papers, so it almost goes without saying that his presidency would continue this detrimental practice. His advances in the political arena with the stated intention of “making direct change on behalf of the ‘public interests’” because our “democratic system needs better representation” have been, quite frankly, absurd. Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders pointed out that the top tenth of the 1 percent owns approximately 50 percent of the world’s income, and that this trend towards such a high concentration of wealth has happened over the last six presidential cycles. It has been predicted that if we continue along this path by 2040 wealth inequality will rise to 9,000 times its current levels, so the average household in the top hundredth of 1 percent will be worth over $250 million. And that much wealth in the pockets of the few means that much less for everyone else.

SOURCES:


Rick Baum, “During Obama’s Presidency Wealth Inequality Has Increased and Poverty Levels are Higher,” Counterpunch, February 26, 2016, http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/02/26/during-obamas-presidency-wealth-inequality-has-increased-and-poverty-levels-are-higher/.


4.
Censored 1987: The Information Monopoly

SUMMARY: In 1982, media expert Ben Bagdikian completed research for his book, *The Media Monopoly*, which talked about how fifty corporations controlled at least half of the media business. But when completing a revision of this book for a second edition by December 1986, the number of corporations controlling much of the media business had shrunk down to twenty-nine, followed by twenty-six just half a year later when Bagdikian wrote an article on the subject for *Extra!*, the publication of media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting. Based upon the predictions of Wall Street analysts, Bagdikian warned that by the 1990s the number of corporations controlling most of our media would shrink down to just six firms.

This rapidly increasing centralization of media ownership has raised questions about the public’s access to a diversity of opinion. By the end of the 1980s, Bagdikian found that fewer than fifteen corporations controlled most of the circulation of daily papers around the country, with fewer than a dozen companies controlling the book business, a handful of firms controlling most of the magazine business (with *Time* magazine accounting for about 40 percent of that industry’s revenues), and only three networks (Capital Cities/ABC, CBS, and NBC) having majority access to television audiences.

What makes this situation even worse is the conflict of interest among interlocking boards of directors for major corporations. A study conducted by Peter Dreier and Steven Weinberg found interlocking directorates in major newspaper chains, such as Gannet (sharing directors with Merrill Lynch, Standard Oil of Ohio, 20th Century Fox, Kerr-McGee, and Kellogg Company, among others), The New York Times (interlocked with Bristol Myers, Charter Oil, American Express, IBM, and Sun Oil, among others), and Time Inc. (interlocked with Mobil Oil, AT&T, American Express, and most major international banks.)
Despite the information uncovered by Bagdikian and others, the impact of the monopolization of information on a free society continues to be ignored by the mass media. Even worse, publishers’ traditional tendency of avoiding controversy tends to promote censorship among writers, journalists, editors, and news directors.

Warned Bagdikian: “...a shrinking number of large media corporations now regard monopoly, oligopoly, and historic levels of profit as not only normal, but as their earned right. In the process, the usual democratic expectations for the media—diversity of ownership and ideas—have disappeared as the goal of official policy and, worse, as a daily experience of a generation of American readers and viewers.”

UPDATE: Media expert Ben Bagdikian was vindicated when he stated that only six conglomerates would control 90 percent of what we read, watch, and listen to. As of today, among some of their holdings, News Corp owns Fox, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Post; Disney owns ABC, ESPN, Pixar, Miramax, and Marvel Studios; Viacom owns MTV, Nickelodeon, BET, CMT, and Paramount Pictures; CBS owns Showtime, the Smithsonian Channel, NFL.com, Simon & Schuster; Time Warner owns CNN, HBO, TBS, and Warner Brothers; and finally, Comcast owns NBCUniversal, AT&T Broadband, Universal Studios, and Universal Parks. These companies provide the majority of Americans with their sole source of entertainment and information, though the latter may often be better described as either misinformation or disinformation.

As the number of major conglomerates that control broadcasting and telecommunications services has shrunk from fifty different corporations to just six within the span of only twenty years, the big question is: How have only a handful of corporations consolidated all of the major television networks and nearly every major news outlet?

During his presidency, Bill Clinton, influenced by the lobbying efforts of the communications and media industries, signed into law with great fanfare the Telecommunications Act of 1996. The top story of that year for Project Censored was “Telecommunications Deregulation: Closing Up America’s ‘Marketplace of Ideas.’” This act eased restrictions on media cross-ownership, allowing for just one corporation or person to own multiple media businesses, such as broadcast
and cable stations, newspapers, and websites. While the stated intention of the law was to increase competition by reducing regulation, it instead strengthened corporations more than even insiders anticipated. The use of mergers as well as the buyouts of smaller, yet still powerful, corporations has created a media oligopoly. While some have supported this as free market competition, many others believe that the government should regulate this industry in order to prevent monopolies and promote media diversity. Opponents of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 have focused on the history of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), a federal office established by the Communications Act of 1934 to regulate all interstate and international communications media in the US.

Since its conception in 1934, the FCC claimed that all broadcast media is the official property of the federal government. In the 1960s and ’70s, with the help of Congress, the FCC created new regulations that prevented companies from owning alternative media outlets within the same market and determining that no company could own more than seven broadcast networks. During the 1980s, however, the
FCC and Congress moved towards media deregulation. New provisions gave broadcast companies the opportunity to own up to twelve networks and eliminated restrictions on content, such as the amount of advertising. Whereas broadcast networks were once required to provide “fair” coverage by giving equal time to opposing viewpoints, in 1987 the FCC removed those regulations. This reduced the FCC’s responsibilities and obligations to the public and gave more power and liberty to the major broadcast networks.

Following a number of Senate hearings that studied the effects of media consolidation, several media organizations petitioned Congress in 2003 to allow for complete deregulation. Later that year, the FCC changed their rules again, this time allowing media organizations to potentially own up to 45 percent of the media in a single market and formally removing restrictions that called for media organizations to serve in the public’s interest. This time, however, Congress repealed these deregulatory decisions, concerned that more deregulation would further encourage the formation of monopolies. As a result, the federal appeals court ruled that the FCC would have to rewrite its restrictions. This only heightened debates between congressional committees and members of the FCC backed by major media representatives. Finally, the FCC was permitted to remove restrictions that prevented major media agencies from purchasing one another.

As a result of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, as well as numerous deregulations by the FCC, mass media consolidation, otherwise known as media oligopoly, became legal within the radio, newspaper, and television industries. Prior to 1996, iHeartMedia, previously known as Clear Channel, owned just forty stations. Once this deregulation act was signed into effect, iHeartMedia came to own 1,240 stations, becoming thirty times more powerful than was previously legal. Gannett, a company that holds many local newspapers at its mercy, owns more than 1,000 newspapers and 600 magazines nationwide, including USA Today, one of the highest-circulating periodicals in the United States. News Corp, a company that managed to avoid paying $875 million in taxes as recently as 2010, owns the top newspapers on three continents, including the Wall Street Journal in North America, the Sun in Europe, and the Australian in Australia. In 2009 the NBC-Comcast merger guaranteed control of one-fifth of the
total hours of all daily broadcasts and a monopoly in eleven major US markets. These mergers, and others like them, are what have led to the consolidation of 70 percent of the cable industry.

Net neutrality is also in jeopardy as a result of this mass media oligopoly. Net neutrality entails a lack of restrictions on Internet content and ensures that all data is treated equally, no matter who created it. Net neutrality allows start-up companies to supplant their competitors in a free market. Ending net neutrality would allow two major conglomerates, Comcast and Time Warner, as well as other big companies such as Cox, AT&T, and Verizon, to essentially construct a two-tiered Internet through the creation of monopolies. These corporations would be able to charge certain technology companies for the ability to more quickly send their data to consumers. Smaller, less established, companies that do not have the funds to pay a premium to them would then be relegated to the “slow lane” of the Internet.

One of the most dangerous implications of this system is that it would allow big businesses to restrict usage for alternative news media outlets on the Internet, and thus silence dissenting political views.

By controlling most of the news and entertainment around the world, these major conglomerates are able to successfully deliver propaganda, social programming, and perpetual crisis narratives to the public, without much of the public being consciously aware of this situation. As fewer and fewer corporations gain even more power to dictate what the public watches, hears, and reads, the access to accurate and unbiased information, to diverse and substantial journalism, is being greatly diminished.

Media conglomerates have spent tens of millions of dollars lobbying the government to do away with the few remaining regulations that prevent their total control of the dissemination of information. If the public can discourage our government from allowing even further deregulation of media industries, it could help potentially create space for actual journalism. However, considering that President Obama appointed Tom Wheeler, former lobbyist for the cable industry, as the chairman of the FCC, the future of net neutrality and investigative journalism may be tenuous at best.

But as this book goes to publication, there is some hope and good news for those who believe in a truly free press and the right to access informa-
tion. A Federal Appeals Court ruled in favor of the FCC upholding net neutrality rules, protecting, for now, an open Internet. We must fight to maintain this openness, as it directly impacts our ability to know and understand the world around us and to be meaningfully self-governing.

SOURCES:

5.
Censored 2008: No Habeas Corpus for “Any Person”

SUMMARY: With the approval of Congress and no outcry from the corporate media, the Military Commissions Act (MCA) signed by President George W. Bush on October 17, 2006, ushered in trial by military commission law for US citizens and noncitizens alike. While corporate media, including a lead editorial in the New York Times on October 19, 2006, gave false comfort that we, as American citizens, would not be the victims of the draconian measures legalized by this Act—such as military roundups and lifelong detention with no rights or constitutional protections—journalist Robert Parry pointed to text in the MCA that allowed for the institution of a military alternative to the constitutional justice system for “any person” regardless of American citizenship. The MCA effectively did away with habeas corpus rights for “any person” arbitrarily deemed to be an “enemy of the state.” The judgment over who is deemed an “enemy combatant” has been left to the sole discretion of the president.
The oldest human right defined in the history of English-speaking civilization is the right to challenge governmental power of arrest and detention through the use of habeas corpus laws, considered to be the most critical part of the Magna Carta, signed by King John of England in 1215. That an 800-year legal mainstay could be wiped out in the swipe of a pen with little fanfare in the 21st century is troubling, to say the least.

Besides allowing “any person” to be swallowed up by the MCA, the law prohibits detainees once inside from appealing to the traditional American courts until after prosecution and sentencing, which could translate into an indefinite imprisonment. Other constitutional protections in the Bill of Rights, such as a speedy trial, the right to reasonable bail, and the ban on “cruel and unusual punishment,” would likewise seem to be beyond a detainee’s reach.

In one of the most chilling public statements ever made by a US Attorney General, Alberto Gonzales opined at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on January 18, 2007, “The Constitution doesn’t say every individual in the United States or citizen is hereby granted or assured the right of habeas corpus. It doesn’t say that. It simply says the right shall not be suspended.”

More important than its sophomoric nature, Parry warned, was that Gonzales’s statement suggested he was still searching for arguments to make habeas corpus optional, subordinate to the president’s executive powers that Bush’s neoconservative legal advisers claimed to be virtually unlimited during “time of war.”

UPDATE: In 2008, the US Supreme Court found Section 7 of the Military Commissions Act unconstitutional, allowing detainees to challenge their detentions. The restoration of some of the right to habeas corpus was covered in Salon on June 12, 2008, and the next day the New York Times reported on the 5-4 ruling. The Times also addressed numerous petitions, and called for better handling of evidence and due process for detainees. The article they published was a more honest and valid representation of the issue than the coverage from 2006.

The Huffington Post has covered current issues with the MCA and the injustices that detainees are facing during their trials. The Act
takes away the right to fire one’s own lawyer without “good cause,” which has been problematic for detainees who don’t trust their lawyers. In addition to torture, solitary confinement, and lack of access to proper medical care and contact with their families, these flaws in the Act directly stand in the way of proper justice.

As of April 2016, the Miami Herald has covered the recent proposal for the Military Commissions Act Amendments of 2016. These amendments aim to improve the efficiency and accountability of the legal process. They are “fully in alignment with the interests of justice and consistent with our American values of fairness in judicial processes.”

The Huffington Post covered the story of Abu Zubaydah in April 2016. Zubaydah was accused of being Osama bin Laden’s senior lieutenant and second-in-command for al-Qaeda. He was one of the first people detained and tortured under the Military Commissions Act. He was waterboarded, lost his right eye, and was a “ghost pris-
"oner" hidden from the world and even the International Committee of the Red Cross, in violation of the Geneva Conventions. Following the introduction of evidence of his innocence, many charges were dropped, and after the Supreme Court ruling, his lawyers were able to file a habeas corpus petition. Unfortunately, seven years later it has yet to be ruled on, and he is still being detained.

In May 2016, Michael Ratner, the former president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, who played an instrumental part in challenging the MCA and prompting the Supreme Court to rule that the denial of habeas corpus was unconstitutional, passed away. The New York Times and other major news outlets covered his death, and in the process shedding some further light on the Military Commissions Act.

SOURCES:


6.
Censored 2015: Ocean Acidification Increasing at Unprecedented Rate

SUMMARY: It’s well known that burning fossil fuels in the form of coal, oil, and natural gas releases carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the air. Less understood is that a quarter of this carbon dioxide—about twenty trillion pounds each year—is absorbed by the oceans. Writing for the Seattle Times, Craig Welch invited readers to “imagine every person on earth tossing a hunk of CO₂ as heavy as a bowling ball into
the sea. That’s what we do to the oceans every day.” As Welch and others reported, this carbon dioxide is changing the ocean’s chemistry faster than at any time in human history, in ways that have potentially devastating consequences for both ocean life and for humans who depend on the world’s fisheries for their health and livelihood.

When CO₂ mixes with seawater, it lowers the pH levels of the water, making it more acidic and sour. In turn, this erodes some animals’ shells and skeletons and robs the water of ingredients that those animals require for healthy development. Known as ocean acidification, this phenomenon, Welch wrote, “is helping push the seas toward a great unraveling that threatens to scramble marine life on a scale almost too big to fathom, and far faster than first expected.”

The impacts of ocean acidification have been most pronounced in the Arctic and Antarctic, because cold, deep seas absorb the most carbon dioxide. Julia Whitty reported for *Mother Jones* that humans have enjoyed a free ride so far: “The ocean has swallowed our atmospheric carbon dioxide emissions and slowed global warming during the past few critical decades while we dithered in disbelief.” Now, however, the average acidity of surface ocean waters worldwide is more than 30 percent greater than it was at the start of the Industrial Revolution. As ocean acidification impacts the abundance, productivity, and distribution of Arctic marine species, these changes are likely to affect the culture, diet, and livelihoods of indigenous Arctic peoples and other populations in or around the Arctic.

Craig Welch, in his “Sea Change” article for the *Seattle Times*, wrote, “The most-studied animals remain those we catch. Little is known about the things they eat.” This points to another problematic dimension of ocean acidification. Despite the potential magnitude of the problem—as ocean acidification is changing the chemistry of the world’s oceans faster than ever before, and faster than the world’s leading scientists had predicted—there is little funding for research on ocean acidification and its effects. As Welch reported, “Combined nationwide spending on acidification research for eight federal agencies, including grants to university scientists by the National Science Foundation, totals about $30 million a year—less than the annual budget for the coastal Washington city of Hoquiam, population 10,000.”
UPDATE: Little has been written on this story since it was published, but a recent article by Deborah Sullivan Brennan in the *Los Angeles Times* expresses the severity of ocean acidification as it reaches dangerously high levels. One of the biggest concerns about the dramatic change in acidity levels is how much they are affecting the world’s coral reefs. Coral bleaching, caused by climate change, is a direct result of temperature increases in the ocean, which absorbs around 93 percent of the increasing heat from the Earth. Studies show that the current water temperature in the ocean has increased by about 1.8–3.6° F. El Niño’s distribution of warm waters across the oceans has compounded the issue of coral bleaching, and has led to some of the worst coral bleaching on record in the Pacific Ocean. Coral reefs lose their color because, when they are under stress from conditions such as higher temperatures, they expel a colored algae called zooxanthellae, which produces the oxygen, glucose, glycerol and amino acids required for the coral’s survival. About 95 percent of the reefs from Cairns, Australia to New Guinea suffer from coral bleaching, and only four out of the 520 reefs show no evidence of being affected by the high acidity levels.

Fortunately, coral bleaching can be reversed, but it would require living conditions in the oceans to return to normal, with added recovery time. Coral reefs are instrumental to the health of the world’s oceans, as they are home to about a quarter of all marine species while covering less than 0.2 percent of the ocean. Coral is made out of calcium carbonate and undergoes a process called calcification in order to grow or produce more coral. The rising acidity of the ocean makes it difficult for calcification to occur and corrodes the calcium carbonate shells of many other creatures. If ocean acidification continues unabated, coral and many other species of marine wildlife could be extinct within a century.

Other marine critters in danger as a result of increased acidity levels include clams, oysters, mussels, and, crucially, various species of plankton. A 2015 study conducted by MIT found that by 2100 ocean acidification will cause many species of plankton to completely die off. Scientists have only recently discovered the role of plankton in the global ecosystem, and have determined that they provide half of the world’s supply of oxygen. If the ocean water doesn’t become...
more alkaline in the near future, many species could become extinct. As human activity has emitted increasing levels of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, the acidity of the ocean's surface waters has increased by about 30 percent since the late-18th century. At this rate, it is projected that, by the end of this century, surface ocean waters could be almost 150 percent more acidic.

Due to the way the Pacific Ocean circulates, the waters of the West Coast are going through an acidification process that is twice as fast as the rest of the world, and the rest of the world's ocean acidification has been far from slow. However, there are a few methods that may slow down the process of ocean acidification. One possible solution to address this issue is to plant more seagrass. This particular plant absorbs carbon dioxide and uses that energy to reproduce. Seagrass has the ability to change the chemistry of the water and a large amount could help reduce the impact of acidification.

Another method which might reverse the effects of ocean acidification is to reduce the amount of pollution that travels through the storm drains and rivers which can exacerbate the intensity of acidification. Common chemicals such as nitrogen and phosphorus have been introduced to the ocean waters, and these chemicals contribute to the high acidity levels by attracting and supporting the lives of algae. Algae decrease oxygen levels in the water, making it more difficult to control the acidity in the ocean, so cutting down on algae by cutting down on chemical pollutants may indirectly solve the problem of acidification.

Another possible solution is to release bubbles of compressed air along the seafloor to help strip carbon dioxide from the water. This process requires a higher concentration of carbon dioxide being dissolved in the water than the air that is being bubbled through, to mimic the composition of the atmosphere. This idea could help vulnerable coastal ecosystems cope with the sudden changes, but it remains too costly at the moment to apply to the rest of the world's oceans.

Undoubtedly, the cost of doing nothing about ocean acidification and climate change will likely be far greater in the long run than any methods enacted today, not only to the ocean life but to all of life on Earth.
SOURCES:


Susan Rahman is a mother and professor of behavioral science at College of Marin. She lives with her daughter, Jordan; partner, Carlos; and two dogs, Rosie and Phoebi, in Northern California.

Notes


The Project Censored number one story for 2015, “Ocean Acidification Increasing at Unprecedented Rate,” viewed online at http://projectcensored.org/1-ocean-acidification-increasing-unprecedented-rate/.


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