CHAPTER 4

Media Democracy in Action

Contributions by Mnar Muhawesh (MintPress News), Peter B. Collins (The Peter Collins Show), Eric Draitser (Stop Imperialism), Abby Martin (The Empire Files), Darcey Rakestraw (Food & Water Watch), Susan Rahman and Eliana Dimopoulos (College of Marin); introduction by Andy Lee Roth

Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

In 1962 James Baldwin wrote, “We live in a country in which words are mostly used to cover the sleeper, not to wake him up.” Baldwin addressed the role for writers, and especially novelists, in helping a nation’s members to understand themselves and their country. The great novelist, Baldwin proposed, was distinguished by the effort “to tell as much of the truth as one can bear, and then a little more.”

These insights apply equally to our era’s most outstanding journalists and their work. At its best, investigative reporting challenges us to wake up and face what Baldwin described with remarkable understatement as “particulars” that “are not very attractive.”

In 2002 Peter Phillips, Project Censored’s second director, introduced the phrase “Media Democracy in Action” as a tagline for the organization’s work. In the preface to Censored 2003, after identifying a crisis of freedom of information in the US, Phillips described media democracy in action in terms of emerging opportunities for truth and discovery: “We can share and tell our stories. We can find our own news and report our victories.” This was a vision of journalism as a progressive social movement, not limited to professional reporters or bound by establishment conventions of depersonalization and balance.
The following yearbook marked the debut of a chapter titled “Media Democracy in Action,” which covered “the everyday activism of grassroots media groups all across the nation.” These groups demonstrated how media analysis and media activism fortify each other. Each yearbook since Censored 2004 has featured a chapter that underscores this point by highlighting the contributions and successes of individuals and organizations that exemplify media democracy in action.

In this year’s chapter, Mnar Muhawesh of MintPress News, Eric Draitser of Stop Imperialism, and Abby Martin, host of The Empire Files, each challenge us to confront the reality of US imperialism, and its consequences. Their engaged news judgment introduces us to a broad spectrum of people who oppose the American empire, voices consistently marginalized or excluded by the narrow, corporate version of who counts as newsworthy. Similarly, Peter B. Collins reminds us how the FBI and local police departments now employ legal powers, originally intended to target terrorists, against non-violent activists. “What we do know about the creeping American police state,” he writes, “would still be secret if it weren’t for courageous whistleblowers.” A public that understands the importance of whistle-blowing, as a corrective mechanism for a failing system, will be more likely to support protections for whistle-blowers, and to hold government and corporate officials to account for the hard truths that whistle-blowers expose.

Darcey Rakestraw describes how Food & Water Watch has successfully countered corporate spin on fracking and water contamination, agriculture, and water privatization. She writes, “Sustained and smart use of research, organizing, and communications tools can help advocates make a meaningful contribution to media narratives—even in the face of massive amounts of industry advertising and PR dollars.” Her examples of Food & Water Watch’s successes provide not only inspiration but also lessons that can be adapted to effective media activism on other pressing social problems.

Though previous “Media Democracy in Action” chapters have highlighted the good work of independent reporters and news organizations, Susan Rahman and Eliana Dimopoulos introduce another kind of media democracy. They describe how a combination of two
revolutionary programs in higher education, service learning and universal design, challenges traditional educational models and promotes greater inclusivity. Rahman and Dimopoulos describe how these programs “help students grow into citizens and community members who believe in the value of helping others, who may differ from them, with compassion.”

The contributors to this year’s chapter urge us to face our society’s most pressing social problems. Furthermore, their examples show us that in many cases—indeed, far more frequently than corporate media would lead us to believe—positive change is possible.

MINTPRESS NEWS AND “BEHIND THE HEADLINE”:
UNFLINCHING, UNCENSORED INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

Mnar Muhawesh

My journey in social justice activism and journalism began when I was just a few years old. I marched with my family in Minneapolis, Minnesota, against Israel’s illegal occupation and apartheid policies. With an ethnic Palestinian background and having been educated from a young age about the importance of human rights, I soon experienced oppression firsthand when my family moved to Palestine for almost four years.

There, I witnessed disturbing war crimes and atrocities and saw the systemic discrimination suffered by my Palestinian classmates and family. I suffered directly under military occupation and martial law, witnessing Palestinian children being shot at with rubber bullets, militarized checkpoints, and planes firing missiles at homes in Ramallah. I returned to the United States as a young teen in 2001, suffering from PTSD and anxiety. Despite these conditions, my experience in Palestine made me passionate about opposing warfare, imperialism, and oppression.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, I protested the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, despite facing intense Islamophobia and bigotry at school. While most American teenagers were unable to locate Iraq or Palestine on a map, I turned to the media to keep informed about wars overseas, only to find pervasive dehumanization
of our wars’ victims. While suffering from PTSD and anxiety from living under Israeli occupation, and from school bullying for being Muslim following the 9/11 attacks, I found courage and catharsis to pursue journalism as a way to speak up for those who don’t have a voice, especially those living in war.

Even then, I knew that journalism was the means I wanted to pursue to help reeducate the public about US wars and to build bridges to help my fellow Americans understand people around the world, especially those who are victims of corporate exploitation and war.

After launching a blog featuring local news and exclusive interviews, in 2009 I broke barriers by becoming the first American TV journalist to report and anchor the news while wearing a hijab. But, after briefly interning at KARE 11, NBC’s Minneapolis/St. Paul affiliate, I became disillusioned by the limitations that the corporate media put on me. It was obvious that corporate journalists have to answer to advertisers and, in many cases, to political agendas before they serve the needs of the people.

In 2012 I left TV news to expand my blog into MintPress News, a global journalism start-up site offering issue-based reporting with a focus on special-interest groups, big business lobbying efforts, and how Wall Street influences our domestic and foreign policies and drives US warfare and imperialism. Through the lenses of social justice and human rights, MintPress examines the effects these forces have on democracy and freedoms as defined by the Constitution. Every day, MintPress brings important stories and unique analysis from a team of freelance journalists and writers located around the country and world. With outlets such as BuzzFeed and the Huffington Post leading online news media with fast-food headlines, sponsored by special interests and lacking in journalistic ethics, part of MintPress’s mission has been to set an example as a profitable news agency that never sacrifices journalistic integrity.

In August 2013 MintPress revealed that Syrian rebels were suspected of using Saudi-supplied chemical weapons in Ghouta, casting doubt on official claims of chemical weapons use by the Assad government. Despite an organized campaign to discredit MintPress and our reporting at the time, this breaking story had a significant
impact on US foreign policy, including preventing an all-out war with Syria. The report cemented MintPress’s reputation as a source of unflinching, uncensored investigative journalism. We continue to hold our elected officials accountable through uncompromising reporting and analysis.

Four years after founding MintPress, I am returning to TV, bringing the same dedication to truth and journalistic integrity that’s distinguished MintPress News: Behind the Headline, a weekly thirty-minute program that began airing in April 2016 on Free Speech TV, a network that reaches more than forty million American households through DISH Network, DirecTV, and Roku set-top boxes. Behind the Headline is currently being structured as a citizen-supported non-profit project.

Each program highlights important issues and stories that the corporate media ignore, and amplifies the voices of fascinating independent thinkers and newsmakers who are usually silenced by the media, including activists for peace and inclusion, government whistle-blowers, and third-party presidential candidates who prioritize the needs and interests of people and the environment.

**MNAR A. MUHAWESH** is the founder and editor in chief of MintPress News, and the host of Behind the Headline, a new citizen-supported TV program launched in April 2016 on Free Speech TV.

**NO SYSTEM CORRECTION IN SIGHT**

Peter B. Collins

My work in recent years has been informed in many ways by courageous whistle-blowers who have striven to expose lawbreaking, fraud, mismanagement, and other wrongdoings in America’s law enforcement, intelligence, and military sectors. These brave individuals never thought they would wear the badge of “whistleblower,” and the list includes an array of agencies: FBI, CIA, NSA, DEA, DHS, TSA, the State Department, and many branches of the Pentagon.

While most administration insiders can strategically leak classified information to advance their political or propaganda goals, the crack-
down on whistle-blowers has been severe and broad-based. It’s no secret that the Obama Justice Department has relentlessly pursued the principled leakers tagged as whistle-blowers, and often, traitors.

Chelsea Manning will be in Leavenworth for decades, and Ed Snowden doesn’t dare leave asylum in Russia. Many lesser-known whistleblowers have lost their livelihoods and pensions, and seen their savings dwindle as they pay hefty legal fees that can double or triple as the government drags out resolution.

In almost every case, these veterans of government service were honoring the terms of their employment and their security clearance agreements, and believed that reporting through “the proper channels” would earn them plaudits, and maybe a promotion. Instead, virtually all of them have been subjected to retaliation that is disproportionate and heavy-handed—and often appears to be illegal. The legitimate secrecy of security operations is used, illegitimately, to punish dedicated public employees whose reports of wrongdoing are embarrassing or challenge internal or external politics.

In many of these cases, we see a massive diversion of resources, including personnel, to silence whistle-blowers and intimidate them into submission. In one outrageous case, when Julia Davis, who worked for Homeland Security at the border near San Diego, alerted her superiors to suspicious traffic at the border, they ignored her. Following protocols, she next reported her concerns to the FBI. That enraged her superiors, who initiated a campaign of heavy surveillance of Davis, which culminated in a warrantless helicopter raid on her home with twenty-seven armed men in SWAT mode. For doing her job, Davis was treated like an enemy.

Many whistle-blowers know that their own cases will not likely be resolved in their favor. But they hope that the risks they take, and the costs they incur, will eventually lead to a system correction; that a latter-day Senator Frank Church will hold hearings that expose the systemic problems and pierce the veil of secrecy that provides immunity to those who violate the law under color of authority. They believe in our system, and that its subversion is a temporary condition that will be rectified when the pendulum swings from oppression to liberty. It’s happened before, but seems unlikely to recur in the foreseeable future.
During the final years of the Nixon administration, I hosted a late-night talk show on WLS-FM in Chicago, owned by the ABC network. Covering the Watergate scandal that led to Nixon’s resignation, the revelations of the Church Committee about CIA assassinations, and the FBI’s sweeping domestic counterintelligence program, COINTELPRO, I learned about the dark underbelly of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Congress passed some reforms that amounted to a system correction. The reforms were not comprehensive or airtight, but for a time it seemed that we were reclaiming our constitutional rights at home while cutting back on the export of orchestrated mayhem.

It wasn’t long though, before we returned to form. President Jimmy Carter, who signed the reform laws written by the Senate’s Church Committee and the House’s Pike Committee, secretly authorized the covert war in Afghanistan that bogged down the Soviet Union and saw the US using mujahideen mercenaries in covert operations. Ronald Reagan went deep with the Iran-Contra schemes, despite the clear congressional ban on support for the Contras.

Since 9/11, we’ve experienced the vertical integration of domestic law enforcement, with expansive powers—some authorized, some arrogated—conferrered on the FBI and local police agencies. The powers and tools that were purported to only target terrorists are routinely used against nonviolent First Amendment activists, run-of-the-mill criminals, and some whistle-blowers. Despite muscular efforts to maintain secrecy, what we do know about the creeping American police state would still be secret if it weren’t for courageous whistle-blowers.

It’s been over three years since former NSA analyst Russell Tice told Sibel Edmonds and me that he had seen wiretap installation orders for phones associated with members of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Supreme Court members and nominees, and other top government officials. Using all available channels, public and private, I have shared this information with more than a dozen members of Congress, thinking that they would at least fight to preserve their own rights under the separation of powers doctrine. In a 2014 interview, Senator Jeff Merkley, an Oregon Democrat who has authored amendments to limit domestic surveillance, became uncomfortable when
Tice’s statements were shared with him, and signaled his aide to end the interview.

We are overdue for a system correction, but our present political leaders display no interest in restoring constitutional rule, perhaps because the NSA and FBI have collected some dirt on those leaders. For now, we must rely on principled whistle-blowers to expose wrongdoing and fight for our constitutional rights.

PETER B. COLLINS is a veteran radio host from San Francisco. You can listen to his podcasts, including interviews with many whistle-blowers, at peterbcollins.com. He is working with Sibel Edmonds and others to launch Newsbud.com an independent, publicly funded media site

THE NECESSITY OF AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE “ALTERNATIVE” MEDIA

Eric Draitser

Although it was already fall, the air was still warm and sticky, the leaves yet to turn their customary burnt reds and browns, and I was at Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan in the first days of Occupy Wall Street, or what would come to be known as the “Occupy Movement.” How could I not be? This was the revolution! This was the moment we’d all been waiting for.

I was there, in the eye of the political storm, with airy thoughts of Rosa Luxemburg fluttering through my mind, her imagined voice forcefully whispering:

The mass strike is the first natural, impulsive form of every great revolutionary struggle of the proletariat and the more highly developed the antagonism is between capital and labor, the more effective and decisive must mass strikes become . . . The mass strike is . . . a universal form of the proletarian class struggle resulting from the present stage of capitalist development and class relations.9

It was clear—this was our mass strike upsurge.
The day had finally arrived when a people’s movement had organized to take on the burning issues of the day—economic exploitation and oppression, the police state, and the military-industrial-financial complex and its endless imperialist wars—and I wanted to be there. After all, it was at that very moment that the US war machine was raining death and destruction on the people of Libya in the name of freedom and democracy, just as it had in Iraq, Afghanistan, and countless other lands before them.

I knew the importance of seizing the moment to drive home the point that those bombs were being dropped on Libya by one arm of the same diseased corpus that saddled us with debt, drove down our wages, foreclosed on our homes, and imposed austerity on us at every turn. Surely I would find allies at Occupy; surely there’d be media (especially alternative media) ready to finally counter the dominant narrative about that war and connect it to the burgeoning movement; surely this was the opening salvo of our resistance.

It didn’t take long, however, to realize that the assemblage of student activists, and even many of the veterans of past protest movements, were either blissfully unaware of the reality of the US-NATO war on Libya happening at the very instant that they were gathered together to talk about solidarity, social justice, and resistance to corporations and capitalism, or they were totally misinformed by both the corporate media and alternative media. I couldn’t believe it. Here I was at “ground zero” of a radical, revolutionary movement, and no one even wanted to discuss actions in solidarity with victims of the very same imperial establishment that we were allegedly opposing.

I was told that Gaddafi was a dictator; we weren’t there to talk about war; we should be in solidarity with the (US-NATO backed) “revolutionaries”; and that I was being an agitator for demanding that we take a stand publicly and immediately. I was dumbfounded. How could this be?

It became clear to me almost immediately that amid all the triumphalism, and all the celebrations of the latest and greatest in protest movements, something was clearly and unmistakably wrong. The Left, progressive, antiestablishment media had utterly failed in its sole duty: to challenge power in the service of social justice. Instead, what I now call the pseudo-alternative media had become a willing cheer-
leader for the Empire. Sure they were willing to focus on Occupy as it ticked off every Left activist box: young people with guitars, a drum circle, lack of demands and leadership, etc. But they were unwilling to touch the blood-soaked elephant in the room: imperialism. The same people who had protested endlessly from well-funded soapboxes against George W. Bush and his criminal war in Iraq had seemingly become the sentinels at the gates of the pro-war Left sanctuary.10

It was at that moment that I knew an alternative to the alternative media was needed, one that could be trusted to take anti-imperialism seriously; one that could be both uncompromising and indefatigable on issues of war and peace. I also knew that such an outlet needed to be financially independent. It could not be bankrolled by the traditional foundation liberals who righteously oppose Republican wars but go conspicuously missing when liberal Democrats wage similar wars. When I looked around at all the biggest names in the alternative media, I found that every single one of them was funded by either Wall Street financiers (Open Society Foundations of George Soros, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, etc.) or by foreign governments (Al Jazeera, Russia Today, Press TV, etc.).11 And while any of those outlets might be useful and do good work in specific cases, none could be regarded as truly independent. It had to be me.

So I started StopImperialism.org with one goal in mind: provide thoughtful analysis from a leftist, anti-imperialist perspective, and try to provide content that could be used to fight the all too necessary information war against the corporate and alternative media establishment online.

But it wasn’t just about putting out the analysis for others to learn from and disseminate; it was about countering the pervasive influence of controlled media narratives in the online space. I had seen how social media had been manipulated during the Libyan war and the start of the war on Syria, when suddenly thousands of Twitter accounts magically materialized to demand military intervention on the part of the Empire to effectuate the fall of Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad, as if by some wave of a wand these countries had become hotbeds of social media activism.

And I remembered a story from February of that year (2011) that explained how the US government contracted for the development
of software that could create multiple fake social media accounts for
the purposes of swaying public opinion and promoting propaganda
in the highly influential social media space. I knew that some of the
most influential bloggers driving the alternative-media narrative on
Libya and Syria had been proved to be hoaxes, such as the so-called
“Gay Girl in Damascus,” who in June of 2011 had been exposed by
Electronic Intifada and the Washington Post. These were just a few
of many examples of precisely the sort of misinformation and disinf-
formation that I wanted StopImperialism.org, my podcasts and writ-
ings, and all my other work to counter.

Of course I knew that this was only one aspect of a much more
complex and multifaceted problem that pointed to the interconnected
series of challenges faced by those trying to undermine the domi-
nant narrative by chipping away at the edifice of information control.
With the so-called “mainstream” media owned and controlled almost
entirely by six corporations—what the late Ben Bagdikian, Pulitzer
prize–winning journalist and former dean of the Graduate School of
Journalism at UC Berkeley, described as a “cartel”—one had to see
the corporate media as an arm of the establishment, the public rela-
tions wing of the Empire.

Simultaneously, I had come to realize that the foundation-funded,
pseudo-alternative media could not be trusted either, as it had eagerly
disseminated pro-war propaganda against Libya and Syria under the
guise of “humanitarian intervention,” or what US Ambassador to the
United Nations Samantha Power insidiously termed “Responsibility
to Protect” (R2P)—a deceptive term to justify war using the laughably
tragic pretext of protecting civilians. It had become clear to me that
the Wall Street–linked foundations funding these pseudo-alternative
media outlets were simply another tentacle of the same establish-
ment that controls the corporate media. In effect, the alleged alter-
native was no alternative at all, merely a different flavor of the same
poison pill.

And so it was here, outside the corporate frame and its so-called
alternative, where I decided to plant a flag, to draw the proverbial line in
the sand. And I continue to do so. There is nothing particularly extraor-
dinary in what StopImperialism.org is, or what I do with my other proj-
ecnts such as CounterPunch Radio, the podcast I produce in partnership
with another bastion of truly independent alternative media. But it does seem to be needed. I produce my work totally independently, without any financial or technical assistance from anyone. I have no staff, no interns, no advertisers, and certainly no profits. I merely produce the best-quality analysis and commentary I can. No more, no less.

ERIC DRAITSER is an independent political analyst, editor of StopImperialism.org, and host of CounterPunch Radio. His work focuses primarily on politics, geopolitics, and the role of imperialism in the modern world. Draitser’s articles have appeared in many publications both in the US and internationally, and have been translated into more than a dozen languages. He is a regular contributor to TeleSUR, CounterPunch, RT, Truthout, WBAI, and a variety of other media outlets. His work on the origins and evolution of the conflict in Ukraine was recently featured in The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism. He is based in New York City.

REVOLUTIONARY TRUTH-TELLING IN TODAY’S MEDIA
CLIMATE: THE EMPIRE FILES

Abby Martin

From fracking dangers to Internet freedom, the stories that most affect people’s lives are routinely repressed, backpaged, and distorted. Americans’ lack of information is not due to some vast, hidden conspiracy—it’s the consequence of an open conspiracy under capitalism, where the CEOs and business owners of media conglomerates work to maintain only one interest: profit.

The corporate takeover of the fourth estate has gutted any semblance of democracy. What started as a free public service became a fire sale in the age of neoliberalism. Telecom companies began tightening their grip on the market by eating each other, resulting in only six corporations now controlling 90 percent of all information in the US.

The government has a lot at stake in how this information is managed, and the corporate media can’t control the masses effectively without its close cooperation. Beyond its own borders, the US war machine deploys subversive media outlets and the propaganda of regime change on behalf of US business interests, polluting the airwaves from Europe to Cuba.
Corporate media and the political establishment work side by side to propagandize the public and manufacture consent for corporate Empire. For decades, DC journalists have been far more concerned with preserving their access and career paths than with doing their jobs. Despite the mantra about America’s great free press, so-called mainstream journalists who go against the line are quickly demoted or fired—just ask Phil Donahue or Cenk Uygur.

The hypocrisy that drives this problem is amplified in the world’s so-called greatest democracy, but it certainly isn’t unique to America. Across the Western world, state governments work in concert with their corporate media in order to maintain the status quo of neoliberalism, capitalism, and endless war. Thankfully, some nations have advanced to buck this crushing system.

While the US media has promoted the interests of US corporate rulers, one of the biggest challenges to this information war in the past decade has been the creation of media projects from nations charting a different path. Many countries around the world not under the boot of the United States have launched their own media offensives, threatening the grip of the hierarchy.

Russia Today (RT), for instance, is a state-funded media outlet specifically designed to deliver the Russian perspective and to target the US government’s endless hypocrisies. The US government recognizes the threat, even holding State Department briefings on how to combat the damage RT is doing to its image.

Revolutions, elections, and changing political dynamics have allowed other countries to develop alternative, leftist media platforms. One such example is TeleSUR, and its English language branch, TeleSUR English, a collaborative project among several Latin American countries that formed to promote the fight against Western domination. Created in 2005 as the “Latin socialist answer to CNN,” TeleSUR is an entity cooperatively run between the states of Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Argentina, Bolivia, and Uruguay.

TeleSUR’s answer to US propaganda and the Western-backed corporate interests in their own countries is a media that highlights the voices of the oppressed and the people’s movement against imperialism. Just like other networks that challenge the Empire’s conventional wisdom, TeleSUR is dismissed as “propaganda” by the
establishment and those unwilling to comprehend the need for revolutionary truth-telling platforms in today’s suffocating media climate.

Aside from the relentless smear campaign against TeleSUR for its affiliations, its entire existence is now threatened by Latin America’s changing political climate.

After the November 2015 election of right-wing president Mauricio Macri in Argentina—one of TeleSUR’s biggest funders—Macri’s administration not only pulled all state funds from TeleSUR, but also censored its coverage, and ultimately removed TeleSUR from Argentina’s airwaves.

The December 2015 right-wing victory in the National Assembly of Venezuela, the heart of and largest source of funds for TeleSUR, has put the network’s total elimination high on the government’s list of priorities. Newly elected politicians have even threatened TeleSUR journalists publicly at press conferences.

Aiding the offensive are US economic sanctions to help undermine government projects like TeleSUR, threatening the very lifeblood of one of the world’s only remaining international leftist media outlets.

This is the context of global media censorship: a world run and shaped by the economic and military Empire of the United States, with its junior partners, collaborators, and puppets lined up behind them. These media offensives are weapons in the very real war to expand and tighten US domination.

It’s with this understanding that I chose to join TeleSUR and create The Empire Files, a weekly documentary series that records the brutal reality of living under the shadow of American hegemony.

It’s difficult to inform the masses in America about the disastrous consequences of Empire when most are conditioned by corporate media to believe that they live in the “greatest country in the world,” and that the US is a righteous moral arbiter of human rights. But with over 800 US military bases littering the world, it’s an undeniable fact that America is the world’s most powerful, far-reaching Empire in human history.

Cementing itself as militarily supreme after terrorizing the planet with its use of two nuclear weapons, the US Empire has subverted the democratic processes of dozens of countries, undermined the people the world over, and installed countless dictators loyal to its will.
In Latin America alone, the US military has intervened 56 times to determine the destiny of other nations, in each case thwarting political self-determination in the targeted country. To ensure access to super-profits for US business across the region, the US even created the School of the Americas (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). Since 1946, this institution has trained tens of thousands of indigenous soldiers—many of whom have gone on to become some of history’s most brutal dictators—and death squads that have committed egregious war crimes against leftists, peasants, and students. Americans understand less about this bloody history thanks to corporate media bias, but in fact these atrocities are comparable to today’s ISIS massacres.

Many of the migrants fleeing to the US today are victims of these dirty wars. Today’s public debates on immigration often fail to acknowledge the role of US military intervention throughout Latin America in manufacturing the current crisis along the US-Mexico border, which results in thousands of casualties every year, turning our southern desert into a graveyard.

A constant introspective investigation of the US Empire is a mandatory task for journalists. The Empire Files takes as its starting point the fact that every issue facing people and the planet, here and abroad, is rooted in this global situation: the supremacy of the US Empire, enforcing its economic order for the benefit of the 0.1% through the pervasive reach of its brutal military might.

As the US Empire marches forward to strangle every drop of profit from the world, it employs an array of weapons spanning from television to drones. We must craft our own weapons of information in order to expose this global reality to the people who have the power to change it.

Abby Martin is the creator of The Empire Files on TeleSUR and former host of Breaking the Set on RT America. She founded the citizen journalism project Media Roots and sits on the board of the Media Freedom Foundation/Project Censored.
Food & Water Watch is an independent organization that illuminates how corporate power influences our access to safe food and clean, affordable water. Additionally—and perhaps more importantly—we organize people to take action to pressure decision makers to provide the proper oversight to serve the public interest. Using a blend of policy research, organizing, and media outreach, we’ve been able to effectively publicize how the oil and gas industry, the food and agriculture industry, and the private water industry in particular are influencing public policy in ways that serve profits, not people. Raising awareness about these issues is key to the political organizing that must happen to protect communities and the environment.

Much of this work is about debunking corporate spin through media outreach and the web. Working to inject our issues into the media is key to unspooling narratives on issues like energy and biotechnology that are carefully woven by millions in industry marketing dollars. Below are a few of the issues that Food & Water Watch have helped shift the conversation by prioritizing communication to the media.

Hydraulic Fracturing and Drinking Water Contamination

For many years, the oil and gas industry has convinced many opinion leaders—including the Obama administration and big environmental organizations—that the way to clean energy is more fossil fuels. Ads on Sunday morning talk shows touted natural gas as a “bridge fuel,” a cleaner alternative to coal until we can ramp up renewables. That was the public line to build support for more hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, a form of extreme energy extraction that has harmed communities, public health, and the environment. Furthermore, it’s not a bridge—it’s a form of energy that will keep us hooked on fossil fuels and that will run the clock out on switching to truly clean energy to avert climate catastrophe.
One of the many much-debated issues with fracking in the media has been pollution of wells in rural communities where fracking is occurring. In June 2015 the Environmental Protection Agency released a report on contamination in drinking water. While the report itself confirmed instances of contamination, the top-level finding communicated to the media in the report’s press materials was that there had been no “widespread, systemic” contamination of drinking water from fracking, as if widespread contamination should be the bar.

It is no surprise that spin was the major takeaway in most news stories published about the report when it was initially published. The finding is also unsurprising given the problems with the study design itself. Geoffrey Thyne, a geochemist and a former member of the EPA Science Advisory Board (a group of independent scientists charged with reviewing agency science) said, “This was supposed to be the gold standard. But they went through a long bureaucratic process of trying to develop a study that is not going to produce a meaningful result.” Neela Banerjee at InsideClimate News reported in March 2015 that the EPA had been unable to collect the data it needed from the industry: “The EPA’s failure to answer the study’s central question partly reflects the agency’s weakness relative to the politically potent fossil fuel industry.”

Food & Water Watch submitted lengthy comments highlighting the disconnect between the agency’s misleading top line and the actual findings of the study. In late October, we brought together allies, including affected individuals, to testify at the EPA’s Science Advisory Board meetings for reviewing the study. The testimonies applied pressure on the EPA to revisit its conclusions that no “widespread, systemic” contamination had occurred. Affected individuals including Ray Kemble and Craig Stevens, from Dimock, Pennsylvania; Ron Gulla, from Hickory, Pennsylvania; John Fenton, from Pavillion, Wyoming; and Steve Lipsky, from Parker County, Texas, all spoke before the panel, and according to Food & Water Watch researcher Hugh MacMillan, their testimonies struck a chord with the independent scientists on the advisory board:

One after another, the scientists, engineers and even some
of the industry representatives took issue with the Obama EPA’s finding. The panelists saw that “widespread, systemic” was a meaningless phrase. They emphasized the “local” and “severe” impacts that were outlined in the study and that were recounted in the public testimonies by Kemble, Stevens, Gulla, Fenton, and Lipsky. And one after another, the panelists noted how the study was plagued at every turn by “uncertainties and data limitations.”

In a cathartic moment, toward the end of the second day, one of the panelists offered up a rewrite of the study’s major findings that captured all of these sentiments, and the panelists erupted in applause. It is safe to say the Obama Administration was not expecting rapturous applause from the panel in support of turning the top line finding on its head.20

Since that meeting, which Food & Water Watch publicized on its website and through media outreach to reporters who had written about the initial release of the study in June, we’ve been able to shift the media narrative by helping shed light on the controversy. The panel reviewing the EPA study has echoed Food & Water Watch’s comments from August, and responded to the testimonies from affected residents by asking the agency to clarify the scientific basis of its “widespread, systemic” line and asking it to include extensive summaries of the high-profile cases of contamination in Pavillion, Wyoming; Dimock, Pennsylvania; and Parker County, Texas, that the agency inexplicably left out of its one thousand page study.

In November, the Pittsburgh Post-Dispatch reported:

According to the peer-reviewed document by the 30-member Science Advisory Board, the EPA’s primary conclusion to its June draft study—that fracking has not caused “widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources in the United States”—isn’t supported by the cited data, which has gaps and deficiencies.21

Food & Water Watch has worked closely with several other journalists to drive the story forward. This episode shows how tireless
oversight of the process—in this case, leading extensive public comments critical of the study, organizing affected individuals to come and testify during the peer-review of the study, and targeted media outreach—has successfully countered what looked like a huge public relations victory for the oil and gas industry when the study was first released.

**Agriculture**

Food and agriculture is big business, and the industry drives media narratives around everything from livestock drugs that enable factory farming to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Industry science drives regulatory approval, and in many cases, little independent research exists. That’s where Food & Water Watch research comes in.

Food & Water Watch scrutinized the development and regulatory oversight of controversial livestock drugs and shed light on a disturbing fact: many of the scientific journals where research is published and disseminated to media have strong ties to the industry. Industry groups play a large role in the production of scientific literature, authoring journal articles, funding academic research, and also serving as editors, sponsors, or directors of scientific journals where much of this research is published. Many academic journals have failed to establish or enforce rules requiring conflict of interest disclosure. According to the Food & Water Watch report, *Corporate Control in Animal Science Research*, the influence this industry wields over every aspect of scientific discourse has allowed potentially unsafe animal drugs—including growth promoters for beef cattle as well as arsenic-based drugs (the latter of which have since been removed from the market)22—to reach the market with virtually no independent scrutiny.

A similar influence is wielded at the university level in agriculture research across the country—including at publicly funded land-grant universities—which more and more steers research priorities to serve corporate interests. Food & Water Watch issued a report in 2012, *Public Research, Private Gain*, that outlined some of the conflicts of interests inherent in corporate funding of agricultural research:
Private-sector funding not only corrupts the public research mission of land-grant universities, but also distorts the science that is supposed to help farmers improve their practices and livelihoods. Industry-funded academic research routinely produces favorable results for industry sponsors. Because policymakers and regulators frequently voice their need for good science in decision-making, industry-funded academic research influences the rules that govern their business operations.

The report notes how land-grant universities today depend on industry to underwrite research, endow faculty chairs, sponsor departments, and finance new construction. For example, one Cornell professor was a paid Monsanto consultant while also publishing journal articles promoting the benefits of recombinant Bovine Growth Hormone (rBGH) for dairy farms. His research was used in Monsanto’s regulatory submissions to the US Food and Drug Administration. Candy manufacturer Mars donated more than $15 million for nutrition research at the University of California to study the nutritional benefits of cocoa, which the company then used to promote the benefits of eating chocolate.23

The report was the topic of an Associated Press article in June 2012, which led to more interest in the issue by other news organizations, including Harvest Public Media, providing fresh media scrutiny to this conflict of interest that continues today.24

The financial relationships between researchers and their industry sponsors are not always disclosed in published scientific papers—or at all. In March 2016 a WBEZ news investigation revealed that a University of Illinois professor had taken nearly $60,000 over the course of two years from Monsanto to travel, write, and speak about GMOs—including lobbying federal officials on industry-related regulations. The professor avoided disclosure through a series of university loopholes, including passing the money through the University of Illinois Foundation, effectively exempting it from disclosure.25
Attacks by Water Companies

Food & Water Watch helps communities ward off the advances of private water companies, which seek to operate local systems while also providing a profitable return to their investors. But handing over control of water systems has lead to a raw deal for consumers, who often suffer worse service at a higher cost, and privatization takes away local control over this precious resource. The workforce may also be cut, resulting in fewer workers to make needed ongoing repairs. Food & Water Watch has provided copious research to educate communities and local government officials about the issue, and has helped over three dozen communities resist water privatization.

And the industry is fighting back. In 2015 it launched a website, Truthfromthetap.com, which asks, “Why are activists meddling with your drinking water?” and offers several attacks on various advocacy groups including Food & Water Watch. A seemingly innocuous educational site to the undiscerning visitor, it’s actually sponsored by the National Association of Water Companies (NAWC). Composed of large US water companies and the US subsidiaries of multinational corporations like Suez, the NAWC has been a member of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which promotes model legislation that helps the bottom lines of its corporate supporters—including industry-friendly measures like deregulation and privatization.

Aware that people—particularly journalists—searching for information about water privatization online might come across this attack site, we posted a response entitled, “Truth from the Tap: A Water Industry PR Blitz.” We search-optimized the title and the content to help ensure that people searching for information about this website would find information about the private water industry and failed water privatizations. It was also republished on AlterNet.

Similar industry attacks on our organization in other forms of media have offered us a platform, ironically, to talk about the failures of water privatization and the motive of the lobby group. For example, in Atlantic City (where state legislation that could force water privatization was being considered), the head of the NAWC, Michael Deane, devoted an entire op-ed in the local paper to attacking Food & Water Watch. We used our opportunity to respond to the attacks by pointing
out how private water was no solution for Atlantic City, and highlighted the failure of privatization in other communities. We also shed light on NAWC’s involvement in ALEC. Our response concludes, “In light of Deane’s hollow attacks on Food & Water Watch, and his inability to set forth a vision for private water in Atlantic City—not to mention all of the risks of privatization and the industry’s profit motive—readers should ask themselves whether they believe private water companies are the best ones to solve Atlantic City’s water woes.”

Conclusion

These are just three examples of how we work to shift the debate in the media, and just a few of the tactics we can use to shed light on corporate influence over policies affecting our food, water, and environment. Sustained and smart use of research, organizing, and communications tools can help advocates make a meaningful contribution to media narratives—even in the face of massive amounts of industry advertising and PR dollars.

DARCEY RAKESTRAW is the communications director at Food & Water Watch, a national advocacy organization

SOCIALLY JUST PATHWAYS TO INCLUSIVITY VIA SERVICE LEARNING AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Susan Rahman and Eliana Dimopoulos

Project Censored has long been a champion of equity through student engagement and empowerment. Students involved in the Project’s Validated Independent News program, for example, challenge status quo assumptions about whose stories are newsworthy, and they call out the limitations of the corporate elite’s top-down model of journalism. Project Censored celebrates news told from multiple perspectives—including, especially, those that the corporate media have marginalized or excluded—and it provides opportunities for students’ direct participation in media analysis and activism. Diverse voices are welcome.
Like Project Censored, service learning and universal design challenge established norms, by calling into question traditional models of education and promoting greater inclusivity.

**Service Learning as a Tool for Social Change**

Service learning is an approach to education that merges community service and academic curriculum via classroom learning.²⁹ This process allows students to gain hands-on practical experience in their field of study, coordinated with classroom study of the field’s theoretical foundations. As research demonstrates, service learning provides many benefits to students. Service learning helps students:

- To shift understandings of civic engagement, by providing them with structured opportunities to become meaning-makers and change-agents in their communities
- To apply theory to practice, while developing valuable work experience
- To create pathways for cooperative models of engagement
- To promote social and environmental responsibility via innovative learning environments

For example, one study found that service learning fostered a student’s heightened sense of competency in the areas of work ethic, patience, diversity, and fairness.³⁰ Another study found that students participating in service learning courses maintained higher grade point averages (GPAs) than students enrolled in traditional curricula.³¹ Research conducted at UCLA found that service learning enhanced not only students’ academic performance (measured by GPA, writing skills, and critical-thinking skills) but also their values (measured in terms of commitment to activism and sensitivity to diversity and difference), leadership and interpersonal skills, and their likelihood of choosing a service-oriented career.³² Finally, traditionally underserved student populations frequently benefit from service learning opportunities.³³ Beyond the direct benefits to students, service learning partnerships create useful connections between educational institutions and their neighboring communities.
Teachers can incorporate service learning into their curricula in a variety of ways. Ideally, the institution would have a coordinator who helps facilitate placing students in community organizations. On many college campuses, a coordinator works as a liaison among students, community partners, and faculty. Alternatively, in the absence of an officially designated coordinator, teachers can do this independently.

This has been the case at our institution. Neighboring agencies have been identified over time, and a list of these agencies is provided to students who enroll in the service learning course. Students then choose an agency from this list. Once placed, students spend sixty hours in the agency, in addition to twenty classroom hours.

Various models of service learning are available. Faculty who incorporate service learning into their curricula have great flexibility. There is no one right way to incorporate it into a curriculum. With that in mind, here are some suggestions based on our experience:

- Make sure to have the students in placement for a minimum of twenty hours. This is a minimum for them to become significantly involved in an agency’s work, and to have a meaningful experience.
- Establish a coordinator who works as the liaison between students and their community organizations. This creates a more cohesive experience for all participants.
- Make sure to connect what students are doing in the field with the course material. This connection is essential; without it, the experience may still be meaningful for students, but it falls short of service learning’s full potential to transform students’ understandings of civic engagement.
- Prepare activities and assignments that assess outcomes. For students, these could include an ongoing journal, a term paper, and/or a class presentation. Community organizations should also be provided with opportunities to assess outcomes of the service learning relationship.

Student feedback is a critical tool for assessment. Many students report high levels of satisfaction with their service learning efforts, in
terms of mastering a course’s stated learning outcomes and changes in their quality of life. Here are representative testimonies from students of ours:

We discussed so many social and interpersonal issues in her classes. We talked about drug and alcohol addiction, the necessity for vulnerability in becoming a better human being, and the many ways the current system can fail to service everyone. We also discussed what we, as individuals, as students, as volunteers for these non-profits could do to bridge that gap between government-provided services and people’s needs.

Volunteering has given me a lot of satisfaction. Helping others has also helped me grow.

Through the Fieldwork class, I found myself engaging in extracurricular activities that I would never have dreamed possible. This was a challenging course, intended to inspire students to think outside the box.

As a teaching tool, service learning is highly effective. On a grander scale, it also serves as a means to facilitate social change. At our institution, the service learning program is intentionally focused on community, equity, and social justice. Mutual benefit—for both students and the organizations they come to serve—is crucial, but the ultimate objective is loftier still. Through our institution’s service learning program, we aim to help students grow into citizens and community members who believe in the value of helping others, who may differ from them, with compassion.

Our model is not unique. Many institutions build service learning into their academic curricula with an eye toward social justice. For example, De Anza College, in California’s South Bay has built the Vasconcellos Institute for Democracy in Action (VIDA) into its curriculum. The program is named after former California State Senator John Vasconcellos, known for his commitments to civic engagement and public education. VIDA’s mission is “to empower
students to become agents of change in their communities and beyond; to foster education that meets the needs of the communities we serve; and to help develop pathways to meaningful participation in local, state, and federal government decision making processes.\textsuperscript{35}

**Universal Design as a Framework for Service Learning and Social Justice**

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) offers a framework to address many social justice challenges. By rethinking the traditional one-to-many classroom hierarchy, UDL principles can highlight and support service learning goals. UDL espouses three principles for addressing inequitable, “one size fits all” curricula: engagement, representation, and action and expression.\textsuperscript{36} These principles align with service learning both in methodology and practice. Both examine and question established educational norms and experiences, as well as seeking to create and promote equitable supports for underserved populations. Arising from the intersection of assistive technology and pedagogy, universal design has its roots in breaking down barriers found in educational institutions’ hidden curricula.\textsuperscript{37}

Universal design’s value is in its scope and scalability: It can be either a tool in the service learning toolbox or the toolbox itself. Simply speaking, universal design’s methodology is rooted in equity and social justice; moreover, these overarching principles can be applied practically to service learning placements. As an example, a service learning placement in a media services outlet that produces captions and descriptive transcripts for multimedia offers an opportunity to gain insight into communities other than the student’s own. Students in this particular placement often report increased awareness and understandings that parallel current accessibility research and findings. For example, such students may come to appreciate the differences between an impairment and a disability: whereas not being able to hear can be the result of an anatomical impairment, the absence of universally designed media to provide equitable access is a socially created disability.\textsuperscript{38}

As mission and methodology, universal design and service learning can be used in tandem, revisiting the VIDA’s charge above,
“to empower students to become agents of change in their communities and beyond.”

SUSAN RAHMAN is a mother and professor of behavioral sciences at College of Marin. Her interest in service learning stems from years of witnessing student engagement and civic responsibility grow as a result of the experience. She lives with her daughter, Jordan; partner, Carlos; and two dogs, Rosie and Phoebi, in Northern California.

ELIANA DIMOPOULOS is the assistive technologist and co-coordinator of the LGB-TIQQ Safe Space at College of Marin as well as an independent scholar. She has also worked as a literacy educator, donated her time to various community nonprofit organizations, and climbed both Mt. Fuji-san and the Gorges du Verdon. Her current work is focused on the intersection of educational technology, disability law, and policy.

Notes

2 Ibid, 1.
8 In 1975, US Senator Frank Church headed the Senate’s Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. The committee, often referred to as the Church Committee, published a series of reports on alleged abuses of law and power by the CIA, NSA, and FBI, and recommended reform of these agencies’ intelligence gathering practices.
11 For analysis of how “philanthropic practices allow the dominant classes to generate knowledge about society and regulatory prescriptions,” see Nicolas Guilhot, “Reforming the World: George Soros, Global Capitalism and the Philanthropic Management of the Social Sci-
ences,” *Critical Sociology*, 13, no. 3 (2007): 447–77. Since the late twentieth century, Guilhot writes, a new transnational strata of financial elites has used philanthropy as “a privileged strategy for generating new forms of ‘policy knowledge’” that converge with their interests.


19 Ibid.


Astin, et al., "How Service Learning Affects Students."


Vasconcellos Institute for Democracy in Action, De Anza College, no date, https://www.deanza.edu/vida/.


"Hidden curriculum" refers to values or behaviors that students learn indirectly through the structure of a schooling system and the methods of teaching used in it. These hidden curricula often perpetuate systemic educational inequalities. See, for example, the contributions to The Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education, ed. Eric Margolis (New York and London: Routledge, 2001).

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Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth
with Project Censored

Foreword by
Mark Crispin Miller
Cartoons by
Khalil Bendib

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