The reality TV president has found his reality TV press. The sensationalist Fake News epidemic, with name-calling and partisan rancor from both major political parties, has helped to blur the lines between relevant news reports and Junk Food News. Project Censored founder Carl Jensen coined the term “Junk Food News” back in 1982 when referring to the trite, sensationalist stories that consumed the major news media. They were empty-calorie stories that often crowded out the kind of real investigative journalism required to maintain a healthy democracy. Project Censored has covered the phenomenon ever since and charted its unfortunate and meteoric rise. Not long after Jensen’s coining of the phrase, media scholar Neil Postman addressed the broader concerns of this analysis in 1985 in one of the seminal works of media ecology, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business. Are we there yet? Our current media and political discourse suggest that perhaps we have arrived.

In 2017 and 2018, navigating news cycles became an Olympic sport, riddled with Junk Food News hurdles at every lap. At the drop
of a “shithole,” the corporate press dissected and dramatized stories with little substantive information or broader cultural relevance, known as “Junk Food News” stories, to the point that they overshadowed reporting on actually significant topics. Consumers of news were left to decipher the significance of each bombardment of alerts, dings, and hashtags, only to find that little lingered behind the flashy surface. The latest Kardashian stunt was debated by animated panelists, a puppy’s fate was publicly mourned, porn-star-turned-whistleblower Stormy Daniels ruled the cable circuit, and Trump’s infamous “shithole” comment was immortalized as a viral GIF.

The Junk Food headlines in this chapter, selected from the 2017–2018 news cycle, were all given priority by the corporate media over crucial investigative reporting. President Trump, the white whale of Junk Food News, manipulates the press much like a kindergartner during playtime. Policies are picked up just to be cast aside like building blocks. The press chases him down slides and across the monkey bars, subjected to his teasing and bullying all the way. The corporate media are, in effect, his playground.

With the weekly stockpile of White House gaffes, Junk Food News now shares the chair of the Oval Office with the sitting president. His tweet storms, his Stormy affair, and his voracious political accusations dominate the corporate media. With each staff turnover and conflict of interest, would-be news stories are sensationalized to the point that their legitimacy is worn down. By late 2017, corporate news organizations began to question the nature of the president’s obtuse ramblings. The Washington Post published a story in October 2017 with a title that appeared to refer to Postman’s—“Trump is Distracting Us to Death.” Soon the New York Times, Vox, and The Hill followed suit with similarly titled op-eds. This series of pieces publicly wondered, “Is President Trump trying to distract us from more important issues?” The Washington Post recounted the viral moment when Trump threw paper towel rolls to hurricane victims in Puerto Rico. This served to distract from the increasing Republican support for gun background checks after the Las Vegas shooting. In the fall of 2017, Trump publicly feuded with National Football League protestors on Twitter. This coincided with Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke’s announcement that 76.9 million acres of federal waters were sold in the largest lease
sale to the oil and gas industry in United States history.\textsuperscript{3} We are pulled away from important issues to chase the idiocy and inanity of our president, often via Twitter and then onto the front pages and prime-time slots of the so-called news.

The corporate media has found its true love as it continues to be enamored by the latest follies of President Trump. Political commentators aggressively evaluate his every weekend in Mar-a-Lago to catch him in Gotcha! moments of contradiction that nonetheless seem to bear few, if any, consequences. Members of the press wait eagerly to find the next biggest scandal, churning out melodramatic op-eds right and left, generally to no avail. Even newsworthy stories are gutted by the 24-hour cycle and reduced to mere soundbites and GIFs. On March 26, 2018, Associated Press White House correspondent Zeke Miller asked White House deputy press secretary Raj Shah, “Why should we in this room—and more importantly, the American people—trust anything this administration is telling them?”\textsuperscript{4}

The existence of fake news itself is what dominates the headlines. Ambiguity shrouds whatever comes out of the White House, and the corporate press is left to spin gold out of straw. We are living in an age where clickbait is the norm. Misconduct is a benchmark for our leaders and double entendres are a CNN staple. When the apocalypse comes and we are too uninformed by the corporate press to notice, thanks to the late, great Anthony Bourdain at least we’ll know where to get the best noodles.

**STICKS AND STONES, BUT SH*TTHOLE HAS HURT SAFA**

On January 11, 2018, President Trump met with lawmakers privately to discuss a bipartisan deal that would protect Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) participants. As he argued against restoring protections in the United States for people from El Salvador, Haiti, and a few African countries, President Trump reportedly asked, “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?”\textsuperscript{5} Corporate media revved up into overdrive to cover the alleged comment. News reports ran continuously for weeks. Politico reported that the Federal Communications Commission logged at least 162 indecency complaints regarding the verbatim use of the word “shit-
hole” by major news networks. CNN received the predominant share of complaints, but other outlets, including NBC News, NPR, and MSNBC, were also named.6

The American public was furious over news coverage impropriety. Conservative and liberal pundits took to the airwaves with arguments and analyses of whether and how this latest Oval Office comment was racist, elitist, and/or just unkind profanity.7 Both Republicans and Democrats were quick to condemn the comment, the Internet exploded with international responses, and #shithole topped Twitter’s trending news for the week.8 The remark came just after Trump’s termination of Temporary Protected Status for migrants from El Salvador and Haiti, which spurred even more outrage. All the while, little attention was paid to the purpose of the meeting—immigration reform. On occasion, articles briefly mentioned that President Trump rejected the meeting’s bipartisan proposal.9 A week following the comment, Haiti was removed from the list of countries eligible for H-2A and H-2B temporary work visas. While there was debate as to whether Trump actually used the word “shithole,” undoubtedly the word not used was SAFA.

Republican Bob Goodlatte’s Securing America’s Future Act (SAFA) received practically no coverage in the corporate media. Amidst heightened immigration contention, the bill was introduced to provide a legislative solution for the nearly 700,000 beneficiaries of DACA. SAFA was introduced in Congress on January 10, 2018, without so much as a mention in the corporate media.10 The so-called solution provides only contingent nonimmigrant status and no consideration for those who will age into DACA eligibility, and it offers no pathway to legal permanent status or citizenship. The bill would limit family-based immigration to spouses and minor children, and would grant the government the right to use DNA verification. Excluding parents, siblings, and adult children further exacerbates the issue of separating families and leaves the fate of the parents of DACA participants undetermined.11

But DACA is only a small provision of the sweeping 400-page anti-immigration bill. Interior provisions propose to infringe upon state and local law enforcement sovereignty. The Department of Justice would be allowed to withhold grants from sanctuary cities. SAFA
would require states to pay local law enforcement to perform the functions of immigration officers. This would be a violation of both the separation of powers and the Tenth Amendment of the US Constitution. Illegal entry and visa overstays would be criminalized under SAFA. Even if individuals have not violated any criminal or civil laws, they would face punishment consisting of fines and/or incarceration for anywhere from six months to 20 years.\textsuperscript{12}

The diversity visa program would be eliminated under SAFA. This is the only means for nationals from some African countries, who don’t qualify for refugee status, to even apply for immigration to the US in hope of a better life. SAFA would also restrict eligibility for those seeking asylum for humanitarian reasons. It is estimated that these provisions would reduce legal immigration levels by issuing 400,000 fewer visas than current policies mandate, which would have significant economic and social impacts.\textsuperscript{13}

This only scratches the surface of SAFA, which also seeks to limit protection for unaccompanied alien children, appropriate $20 billion for a wall along the Mexican border, increase Customs and Border Protection by 5,000 new hires, and implement a biometric identification program for the employment of immigrant workers, amongst other Big Brother policies. DACA deadlines have come and gone without a glimpse of political compromise. Meanwhile, SAFA quietly gained 96 Republican co-sponsors, which further distanced any hope for a bipartisan bill.\textsuperscript{14}

While the impending passage of a Big Brother–type bill looms over the legislature, all the press can do, it seems, is literally talk shit. On April 30, 2018, a reporter asked Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari, the first leader from sub-Saharan Africa to visit the White House since the inauguration, the question still weighing on American minds: whether the two presidents have discussed Trump’s “shithole” comment.\textsuperscript{15}

**KEEP UP WITH KYLIE AND NEGLECT BLACK INFANT MORTALITY**

Makeup guru and social media icon Kylie Jenner gave birth to a daughter, Stormi Webster, on February 1, 2018.\textsuperscript{16} In early September
2017, rumors began to spread about Jenner’s pregnancy, but nothing was ever confirmed. For months fans had been chomping at the bit for any sign that the youngest sister of the Kardashian/Jenner family was actually pregnant—and, if she was, they demanded to know: Who was the father? The corporate press attempted to out Jenner’s pregnancy for six months. It was featured among the trending headlines on almost every social networking site.17 The Jenner story enticed us to forget the political disarray of our time, sweeping us up in the fantasy of her glamorous life. Our obsession with the Kardashian baby also helped divert attention from a startling new report on the black infant mortality rate.

With today’s technological innovations, one would only assume high infant mortality in the United States was a thing of the past. The research suggests otherwise. According to recent data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “For every 1,000 live births, 4.5 white infants die in the first year of life. For black babies that number is 11.7.”18 This begs the question: What could be causing this racially disproportionate infant mortality rate? Could it be the diet of black women? Or perhaps smoking/drinking habits? Poverty? Overall health and exercise? Education? Strikingly, even black women with advanced degrees and high-paying prestigious professions are more likely to lose infants than white women who haven’t graduated from high school. Were it not for tennis star Serena Williams’s childbirth complications making headlines, this story might have all but faded into oblivion.19

Although minimally covered in the corporate press, this infant mortality disparity has been under investigation since the 1990s. To much surprise, the collective findings conclude that the main culprit of the black infant mortality rate is, quite simply put, the stress of being a black woman in the US.20 The lives of black women (and men) are filled with greater harassment, microaggressions, fear, and danger than the lives of their white counterparts. This increases the likelihood of health risks during pregnancies and childbirth.21 Stress throughout the span of a woman’s life can prompt biological effects that endanger the health of her future children. Stress can disrupt immune, vascular, metabolic, and endocrine systems, and cause cells to age more quickly.22 Chronic stress raises levels of cortisol, a
hormone that at elevated levels can induce early labor. Higher levels of cortisol can cause an inflammatory response that restricts blood flow to the placenta, which stunts infant growth and lowers the birth weight. Black mothers have a greater chance of early onset labor and are more likely to be unable to carry their child to full term. So, while little Stormi’s entry into this world was anticipated with bated breath, we as a society missed identifying and addressing an entirely treatable, yet ongoing, health crisis, one that highlights why movements like Black Lives Matter and Showing Up for Racial Justice are so desperately needed. These groups call attention to the racial disparity of infant mortality while the corporate press continue to neglect the issue in favor of celebrity baby talk.

PUPPY EYES BEFORE HUMAN RIGHTS

On March 12, 2018, a ten-month-old French bulldog died during a United Airlines flight. The flight crew required that the dog stay in the overhead bin for the duration of the flight. From the date the dog died, this story spread like wildfire across the corporate media. In April 2018, Fox News reported that the family was considering filing a lawsuit. Human interest stories reign as Junk Food News; they are the zeitgeist for 21st-century establishment media, especially if they are aesthetically and emotionally appealing and pose no threat to corporate interests. While the public cried foul on United Airlines and demanded animal rights, a fundamental human rights issue was all but ignored by the corporate media. Victims of human trafficking are frequently funneled into the agriculture industry with the help of the US government. This disgraceful oversight is neither cute nor cuddly. An April 2018 Frontline documentary on PBS highlighted an example of modern-day trafficked slavery in the United States. The documentary focused on a group of eight minors who were granted immigration status from Guatemala. Their trafficker set up a system of fake sponsors for the minors to pose for immigration officials at the border. The minors were then enslaved on a Trillium egg farm in Ohio to pay off the $15,000 fee their traffickers charged. When the workers refused to pay, the traffickers would threaten physical violence against them and their families.
According to a 2016 Senate subcommittee investigation into the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), immigration officials overlooked their responsibility to follow up on the cases of unaccompanied sponsored minors. HHS is unable to locate 19 percent of unaccompanied minors in cases from 2016 to 2017. More than half of these minors did not appear for their immigration hearings. The case highlighted by the *Frontline* documentary is not an isolated incident; the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations has now heard 12 similar cases. This investigation revealed ubiquitous exploitation throughout the agricultural industry and neglect by the US government, but the corporate media refuses to hold anyone accountable, ultimately failing in its role as a free press.

According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, a majority of labor trafficking victims are forced to work in the agricultural industry. One Green Planet reports that 72 percent of factory farm workers are born outside of the United States. Captors exploit the isolation of farms and processing centers and the marginal status of seasonal workers to prevent captives from escape. The harmful conditions of factory farms cause an employee turnover rate of more than 95 percent annually. There is a 50 percent chance of injury in factory farming jobs, with 70 percent of agricultural workers experiencing respiratory issues due to contact with ammonia, hydrogen sulfide, and bacteria. The income of factory farm workers falls below the federal poverty line, with shifts that last ten or more hours. Workers refrain from reporting workplace hazards because they risk impulsive firing or deportation. This practice traps workers in a catch-22 position, forcing them to survive in debilitating working conditions.

Crucial investigations into the agricultural industry were eclipsed by the corporate media’s sensationalized United Airlines story. Focus on a story about a puppy with cute, sad eyes, and it will dominate the news cycle. Once United resolved the issue, their corporate interest was protected by the press. United representatives were given a platform for sound bites and interviews by a variety of publications. It appears that this was by design. The *Frontline* investigation was largely unmentioned in lieu of the updated airline story, with United officials rewritten as heroes. While busy protecting the interests of United Airlines, the corporate media simultaneously protected the
interests of the agriculture industry by not calling out documented human rights violations. A well-worn idiom reminds us that every dog has its day. Today that might be taken quite literally: while the next air-traveling dog may be granted safe passage, where is the justice for victims of human trafficking?

**SEX, LIES, AND SHARK WEEK**

*Live every week like it’s Shark Week.*

—Tracy Jordan, *30 Rock*

Prior to 2018, few people without a vested interest in the porn industry knew the name of adult film actress Stormy Daniels. That all changed after January 12, when the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Daniels was allegedly paid $130,000 by Donald Trump’s personal lawyer to deter her from publicly revealing an extramarital affair she had with Trump years earlier. The lawyer in question, Michael Cohen, initially denied the story only to issue a statement to the *New York Times* a month later that he did in fact pay Daniels—but from his own pocket, stating that the exchange was lawful and not connected to the Trump campaign in any way. Stormy Daniels was ubiquitously covered by major establishment and entertainment news sources for the first quarter of 2018.

Daniels’s interview on *60 Minutes* in late March was a ratings blockbuster for CBS—the largest audience the news program had in a decade, with a higher viewership than that year’s Grammy Awards and Golden Globes ceremonies. There was no major new revelation or proof of the affair. We did learn that Trump liked being spanked and that he made Daniels watch hours of the Discovery Channel’s famed Shark Week programming with him. The most famous porn star on Earth is currently on her “Make America Horny Again” tour, making appearances at strip clubs across the country (a job it seems like the president wishes he had right about now). It may be counterintuitive that someone who bragged that she could “describe [Trump’s] junk perfectly” would be a genuine threat to the presidency and not simply an extension of Trump’s reality TV administra-
tion, but the Daniels story may be more than the Cosmo articles make it seem.

As scandals go, the Stormy Daniels saga has it all: sex, money, politics, abuse of power, threatening goons, lies and cover-ups, suits and countersuits... and possible federal crimes. The Los Angeles Times succinctly summed up the news story as “a tawdry tabloid tale that also happens to have potentially enormous political ramifications.” Corporate media did its due diligence in following the ever-changing narrative. More questions were raised after the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided Michael Cohen’s New York office in connection with Daniels’s payoff as well as other ongoing criminal investigations into charges that include bank fraud. With Cohen under investigation, Trump’s legal team needed new blood to defend the commander-in-chief. They acquired former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani for the job. Giuliani confirmed to Fox News in May that President Trump reimbursed Cohen for the $130,000 paid to Daniels—a direct contradiction of Trump’s earlier denials—in order to quell rumors that campaign funds were used for the payoff, which would amount to a federal offense.

Amidst the personal and legal dramas surrounding the Daniels payoff, there was a dearth of coverage on two bills that raced through Congress. With near-unanimous approval, these bills threaten both sex workers and the future of freedom on the Internet. One week before Daniels’s much-anticipated 60 Minutes interview, the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) passed by 97–2 in the Senate. While the bill was purportedly intended to protect victims of online trafficking, advocacy groups argued that it would endanger trafficking victims and sex workers. Two months earlier, the House passed the bill’s counterpart, the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), which permitted authorities to hold websites used as platforms for solicitation liable to civil as well as federal prosecution “even if they were unaware of users promoting sex trafficking.”

Combined into one single bill with an unwieldy acronym, FOSTA-SESTA targeted sites known for solicitation ads. In spite of its aim of stopping sex trafficking, the bill faced an onslaught of criticism. Sex workers and human rights groups such as the American Civil
Liberties Union, The National Center for Transgender Equality, and Freedom Network USA, an alliance of advocates who say they support a human rights-based approach to human trafficking, spoke out against the bill. These critics claimed that the FOSTA-SESTA bill forces traffickers to go further underground, which makes it more difficult for the government to find them. This hinders law enforcement investigations of nonconsensual sex work and endangers consensual sex workers.45

What went underreported by the corporate media was how the bill will undermine a decades-old law that laid the foundation for “the basis of free internet as we know it”: Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996.46 Section 230 protects Internet sites “against laws that may hold them accountable for their users’ content,”47 but FOSTA-SESTA amended that provision so that victims of online trafficking could “legally pursue websites that facilitate trafficking . . . and [make] it easier for federal and state prosecutors and private citizens to go after platforms whose sites have been used by traffickers.”48 Website operators are now responsible for anything that users generate on their sites and are open to litigation. This impacts vital communication platforms that sex workers use to warn one another about dangerous clients, find emergency housing, and assist in screening potential clients.49 Following the passage of FOSTA-SESTA, Craigslist personal ads and Reddit subforums used by sex workers were expunged from the Internet in order to avoid future fallout. This pulls a vital safety net right out from under those who need it most, and raises serious concerns about free speech protections on the Internet.50

FOSTA-SESTA is an “enormous chilling of free speech,” declared Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR), co-author of Section 230, and one of the two opposing votes for the Senate version of the combined bill.51 Not only will FOSTA-SESTA endanger the very people it was supposed to protect, but it could potentially affect everyone who uses sites like Facebook and Yelp. This is a destabilization of free speech online and calls into question the future of the net neutrality debate. President Trump signed the bill into law on April 11, two days after the FBI raid of Cohen’s office and hotel room.52

Stormy Daniels and FOSTA-SESTA as presented to the public
were simple and straightforward stories on their respective surfaces. The former appeared to involve a torrid sexual exploit with a very powerful man befitting tabloid covers, and the latter appeared to be a law to stop sex trafficking online. But much like Trump's binge-watch programming of choice, Shark Week, the frothy coverage of Stormy Daniels and FOSTA-SESTA had deeper, more perilous dangers lurking in the depths. The fangs of potential campaign fraud charges looming over the heads of Cohen and Trump were captured for all the world to see. Unfortunately, the coverage was not the same for FOSTA-SESTA. The press was unable or unwilling to exhume the facts about the bigger threat against sex workers, trafficking victims, and Internet freedom protections. As is often the case with corporate media's love of Junk Food News, Trump's past sexual exploits and TV-watching habits were the bigger stories. The corporate news media may have focused on the surface waters of the Stormy Daniels case, but the ripple effect from FOSTA-SESTA will be felt for a long time to come.

CONCLUSION

This chapter constitutes just a small selection of the innumerable accounts of the corporate media's willful censorship. The preponderance of published Junk Food News stories represents an ongoing disservice that news agencies perpetrate on the American public. The safeguarding of corporate interests, financial gains, and the total tally of eyes on a page or screen shapes the content of the corporate news cycle, not the utility of valuable information that is in the public interest. The Instagram karma of a Kardashian baby was given priority over a health crisis that reveals the extensive effects of racial inequality. The illicit Stormy Daniels affair garnered more attention than a bill that unjustly ignores the nuances of sex work in the 21st century. A cute puppy photo served as distracting clickbait to divert from the realities of human trafficking. One “shithole” meme attracted like flies more pundit analysis than two immigration bills with evident racial bias.

Entertainment has become the almighty answer for news media seeking ratings, a stark contrast to the purpose for which they were
designed: to provoke questions and hold those in power accountable. In this time, we must turn to smaller, more independent agencies to dissect the nuances of our reality. We must approach the corporate media with the careful consideration of an Anthony Bourdain on the hunt for the next best noodle dish. A media-literate consumer will work to see past the brothy surface of our media landscape to find substance and be on the lookout for truth, whether it’s digestible or not.

SUSAN RAHMAN is a mother and professor of behavioral sciences at the College of Marin. Her work toward social justice in her classes allows for student inquiry into the pressing issues of our times. In addition to her teaching, she humbly serves as the vice president of the Media Freedom Foundation. She resides in Northern California with her family.

IZZY SNOW is an incoming sophomore at the College of Marin. She graduated from the Communications Academy at Sir Francis Drake High School in 2016 and then took a gap year, working full-time at Revolution 9 in Fairfax, CA. Izzy hopes to transfer to a four-year university where she will study film and sociology. She adored working with Project Censored and hopes to collaborate with local media stations in the future.

Notes
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45. Quinlan, “Sex Workers would be Endangered.”
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NEWS MEDIA

NEWS CONSUMER

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DUMBED DOWN TO DEATH

OVERDOSE ON VIRGIN SALACIOUS PLUFF

PASSED ON TO A BETTER PLACE: INTERNET HEAVEN