

# Media Democracy in Action

Contributions by Samantha Parsons (UnKoch My Campus), Hans-Joerg Tiede (American Association of University Professors), Chenjerai Kumanyika (*Uncivil*), J. Spagnolo and Elle Aviv Newton (*Poets Reading the News*), and Eleanor Goldfield (*Act Out!*); compiled and with an introduction by Steve Macek

Since 2004, the Project Censored yearbook has featured a chapter entitled “Media Democracy in Action” that showcases the voices of organizations and individuals fighting against censorship, disinformation, and the corporate media’s enormous influence over our culture and our politics. Over the years, contributors to the chapter have included free speech activists, media reformers, radical TV journalists, investigative reporters, media literacy educators, documentary filmmakers, and government watchdog groups. What all these people and groups have in common is a shared determination to search out and publicize often-suppressed truths and a shared faith that public truth-telling can spark and sustain movements for social justice and genuine democracy.

Such efforts have always been important. But they are arguably even more important in the present moment. Today, the White House is occupied by a pathological liar with authoritarian tendencies who has nothing but contempt for facts, science, education, journalists, and the First Amendment. Meanwhile, the corporate news media seem hell-bent on lending credibility to Trump’s accusations of “fake news” with their endless rumor-mongering, groundless speculation, and thoughtless parroting of Republican and Democratic Party talking points.

The contributors to this year’s chapter have each in their own way worked to provide the rest of us with the knowledge, information, insight, and critical analysis that are so vital to the struggle for a better world.

In their contributions, Samantha Parsons of UnKoch My Campus and Hans-Joerg Tiede of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) expose the current threats posed to academic freedom and the autonomous functioning of the university by conservative pressure groups, and they discuss some of the ways faculty and students have successfully resisted outside meddling in the internal affairs of the academy. Parsons examines some of the well-funded and often underhanded efforts by the billionaire Koch brothers to promote their “free market” ideology on campuses across the country and discusses how her group is successfully fighting back. Tiede’s essay explains what academic freedom is and presents an overview of the various ways that the AAUP defends it.

The last three contributions to the chapter highlight creative media projects with a definite critical edge. In his piece, scholar and journalist Chenjerai Kumanyika explicates the philosophy behind his Peabody Award–winning history podcast *Uncivil*, which tells stories left out of standard narratives about the American Civil War and in the process debunks cherished Southern myths about the conflict and its origins. In their essay, J. Spagnolo and Elle Aviv Newton spell out how their online publication and event series, *Poets Reading the News*, harnesses the power of “journalism in verse” to respond to the buzzing confusion of daily events and the difficult, complex issues they raise. Finally, in her entry, Eleanor Goldfield lays out the aims of her innovative video newscast *Act Out!*, a show that combines politically charged spoken-word monologues with interviews featuring radical thinkers, activists, and artists who don’t normally make it onto the *Meet the Press* guest list.

Together, the contributors to this year’s chapter demonstrate what media democracy in action looks like. They show that fearless truth-telling in the service of social change is still alive and well, even though you would not know it from watching network TV news.

## **DARK MONEY AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE**

Samantha Parsons

Since the 2016 publication of Jane Mayer’s book *Dark Money*, more and more people have been paying attention to how Charles and

David Koch, better known as “the Koch brothers,” use their wealth to promote free-market causes and influence state and federal elections throughout the country.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, many remain unaware of how the Charles Koch Foundation (CKF) manipulates our nation’s universities to serve this political agenda.

UnKoch My Campus seeks to expose and prevent donors like the Koch brothers from being able to buy undue academic influence to advance their libertarian ideology and corporate bottom-line. Established by a group of concerned students and activists, we conduct investigative research on the Kochs’ higher education investments, track how CKF donations violate standard academic principles, and support students, faculty, and community members in a national effort to resist Koch-funded corrupt programs on their campuses.

By Charles Koch’s own admission, universities are the most important thread in this web of influence. The CKF’s financial investments are driven by a strategy known as the “Structure of Social Change,” which seeks to establish an expansive infrastructure of universities, think tanks, and front groups that are meant to shape the media, all branches of government, and our education system. First, the Kochs fund universities to produce research and teach curricula that support the ideas they want to dominate local, state, and national policy narratives. This includes funding research and classes that explore the “virtues of free enterprise” through the creation of free-market centers and courses on the principles of economics, ethics and entrepreneurship, political economy, philosophy, and Western civilization.<sup>2</sup>

These ideas are then transformed into policy proposals at Koch-funded think tanks, championed by a network of front groups (such as Americans for Prosperity), and ultimately used to lobby elected officials who often receive direct campaign contributions from Koch Industries.

Since 2005, the CKF has spent \$195 million on programs at nearly 500 colleges and universities, while coordinating \$100 million from other donors. In 2014, recordings of Koch officials confirmed suspicions that Koch-supported academic programs were in fact being used as recruiting grounds to bring students into their “talent pipeline” of right-wing think tanks and front groups across the country. One official was recorded bragging that this “fully integrated” academic/

political project would “not just change the policies of those states, but also have a significant impact on the federal government.”<sup>3</sup>

To make sure his university investments yield the results he wants, Charles Koch attaches expectations to his “philanthropy” that often require strict secrecy and violate long-standing principles of academic freedom and shared governance. This has included interfering with the hiring of faculty; influence over the creation of new programs, majors, and curricula; screening of graduate fellows; approval power over dissertation topics; and oversight of research.

But faculty and students have had enough. Since 2014, UnKoch My Campus has supported dozens of campuses in exposing the CKF’s threats to both the integrity of universities and the long-standing principles that are meant to protect the production of knowledge.

## **Faculty Resistance**

Faculty at Wake Forest University have issued two reports about their investigations into the creation of a Koch-funded center on their campus. Based on these reports, the WFU faculty senate passed a motion to cut ties with Koch and his network of political donors. This move was inspired by the efforts of faculty at Western Carolina University, where faculty voted to reject the creation of a Koch-backed center, and the University of Kentucky, where two faculty committees voted to reject a proposed Koch center’s governance structure.

More recently, the faculty senate at George Mason University created a committee dedicated to improving the university’s gift acceptance and institutional conflict of interest policies to prevent undue donor influence. After the release of a lengthy report on Florida State University’s Koch-funded programs, the FSU faculty senate passed a motion to review the university’s gift acceptance policies.

Faculty are also leading efforts to investigate donor influence at Syracuse University, University of Arizona, University of Utah, Montana State University, Brown University, Arizona State University, and Middle Tennessee State University.

## Student Resistance

Students have been behind much of the resistance to Koch influence across the country, often helping to spark faculty opposition. The CKF has responded by funding initiatives to pass model legislation that would suppress student dissent on campus (as featured in *Censored 2018*).<sup>4</sup>

Students at George Mason University filed a lawsuit against their university and its fundraising foundation to obtain access to Koch donor agreements. George Mason University has received more than two-thirds of all CKF giving, totaling over \$100 million.

The student newspaper at Chapman University released an in-depth investigative piece in response to their university's newly-proposed Koch-funded center, revealing that the Koch funding behind new hires in several departments went undisclosed. The newspaper's editorial board later concluded that "accepting this money is unethical and wrong."<sup>5</sup>

After our recent report on neo-Confederate professors featured a Koch-funded white supremacist political scientist at Florida Atlantic University with ties to private prisons, FAU students mobilized to educate peers and faculty while calling for a deeper investigation into donor influence and white supremacy on campus.

With resistance on the rise, the Charles Koch Foundation's legitimacy is fragile. Local fights can have much larger implications. To do your part to help destabilize the Koch network, visit [www.unkochmycampus.org](http://www.unkochmycampus.org) or contact Samantha Parsons at [samantha@unkochmycampus.org](mailto:samantha@unkochmycampus.org).

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SAMANTHA PARSONS is a grassroots campaign organizer and co-founder of UnKoch My Campus. She provides university stakeholders with the support needed to investigate, expose, and launch strategic grassroots campaigns to address undue donor influence on their campuses. She is an alumna of George Mason University with a degree in Conflict Analysis and Resolution and a research background in structural violence, social movements, and Western influence in international peace-building programs.

## **HOW THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS PROTECTS AND DEFENDS ACADEMIC FREEDOM**

Hans-Joerg Tiede

In a recent survey of university provosts, 29 percent responded that faculty at their institution had been “unfairly attacked by conservative websites and politicians.”<sup>6</sup> Such attacks, occurring on websites such as Campus Reform—which claims in solicitations for donations that it “exposes the liberal bias and abuse against conservatives on America’s colleges and universities”<sup>7</sup>—are regularly followed by large numbers of threats against the targeted faculty member and the institution. In some cases, administrations have suspended or dismissed faculty members who were subject to online harassment. Although harassment campaigns are intended to silence and intimidate those who are targeted, because they have occurred so publicly, including on social media, they can also cause institutions or even other faculty members to censor themselves. Thus, over the course of the last year, targeted harassment of faculty members has emerged as a significant threat to academic freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Although academic freedom in the United States receives some protection—at public universities—from the First Amendment, the conception of academic freedom in this country predates its judicial recognition and has developed largely outside of it. The American Association of University Professors regards academic freedom as a right extended to members of the academic profession who fulfill their obligations in upholding professional ethics. The AAUP also recognizes that, if faculty members are actually to experience academic freedom, colleges and universities must adopt policies that define academic freedom and protect faculty members from adverse administrative actions that violate it. The AAUP has long argued that institutions of higher education in which academic freedom is insecure cannot adequately serve the common good.

The Association’s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure approved the following brief definition of academic freedom for incorporation into faculty handbooks and collective-bargaining agreements:

Academic freedom is the freedom to teach, both in and outside the classroom, to conduct research and to publish the results of those investigations, and to address any matter of institutional policy or action whether or not as a member of an agency of institutional governance. Professors should also have the freedom to address the larger community with regard to any matter of social, political, economic, or other interest, without institutional discipline or restraint, save in response to fundamental violations of professional ethics or statements that suggest disciplinary incompetence.<sup>9</sup>

Of the four activities covered by academic freedom—teaching, research, intramural speech, and extramural speech—the last is the most controversial, because addressing the larger community does not necessarily relate directly to the expertise or professional function of faculty members. Although there are sound theoretical reasons for its inclusion, one reason is perhaps more pragmatic than all others: from cases of professors dismissed in the 1910s because they advocated against child labor, to dismissals in the 1950s because professors defended desegregation, to dismissals in the 1960s because professors advocated for less conservative codes of sexual morality at public institutions, to dismissals in the 1980s because professors advocated for less conservative codes of sexual morality at Catholic institutions, to cases of faculty members dismissed today because their posts on social media sparked outrage campaigns against them, extramural utterances are frequently cited as reasons for dismissing faculty members.

Since its founding in 1915, the AAUP has maintained that the best protection for academic freedom is tenure, which is defined as an indefinite appointment terminable only for adequate cause or under extraordinary circumstances, such as financial exigency. Tenure, in turn, is protected by academic due process. Thus, over the course of the last century, not only has the AAUP helped define and establish the modern tenure system in the United States, but it has also spurred the widespread adoption of procedural safeguards for conducting dismissal and appeals hearings, for the imposition of sanctions, and for the adjudication of grievances. Documents containing

these procedural standards are found in the AAUP Redbook, formally known as *Policy Documents and Reports*.<sup>10</sup>

The AAUP conducts investigations when it receives credible evidence that a serious departure from its key standards may have occurred. An investigation is conducted by an ad hoc committee of AAUP members who visit the institution, interview involved faculty members and administrative officers, and prepare a report of their findings. The goal of an investigation is to ascertain facts and interpret them in light of AAUP policy. For instance, in 2015 the Association conducted an investigation of the dismissal of Professor Steven Salaita from the University of Illinois for his Twitter posts criticizing in strong terms the war in Gaza. The AAUP's decision to conduct an investigation does not assume that a violation has occurred, and some published reports have actually exonerated the subject administrations. In the last century, the Association published more than 300 investigative reports. Not only are these reports a rich source of academic case law interpreting the AAUP's policies in specific circumstances, they also record the history of the development of academic freedom in the United States as it encountered a variety of challenges.

If Committee A finds that the investigative report has identified a serious violation of AAUP-supported standards of academic freedom and tenure, the Association's annual meeting can vote to censure the offending administration. For example, the above-cited investigation of the dismissal of Professor Salaita led to the censure of the University of Illinois administration. Since one condition for the removal of censure is the adoption of AAUP-supported procedural standards, which occurred at the University of Illinois just two years later, the institution of censure serves to facilitate the wider adoption of those standards.

Even though the Association works entirely in the realm of persuasion, its activities have helped shape higher education in the United States. Its recommended policies are included in thousands of faculty handbooks and collective-bargaining agreements. But perhaps more importantly, its central tenet—that academic freedom is essential for higher education—is widely accepted, even though challenges to academic freedom, both old and new, point to the continued need for an organization that serves to protect and defend it.



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HANS-JOERG TIEDE is senior program officer in the Department of Academic Freedom, Tenure, and Governance of the American Association of University Professors ([www.aaup.org](http://www.aaup.org)). He is the author of *University Reform: The Founding of the American Association of University Professors* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015) and editor of the 11th edition of *AAUP's Policy Documents and Reports* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014). The opinions expressed in this essay are the author's.

## **PUNCHING CENSORED HISTORIES IN THE FACE: THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE *UNCIVIL* PODCAST**

Chenjerai Kumanyika

In 1634 a man of African descent listed in official records as “a molato” arrived in bondage in Maryland on a Jesuit ship named *The Ark*. Like the other men who had arrived on that ship, Mathias de Sousa toiled for the person that owned his labor for endless days, doing work such as harvesting crops and building houses. Then, in 1641, he did something that challenged the historical narrative that I have been taught: he campaigned and was elected to the Maryland General Assembly.

On October 21, 1909 legendary journalist Ida Tarbell of the *American Magazine* wrote to General F.C. Ainsworth of the United States Army, saying that she was “anxious to know whether your department has any record of the number of women who enlisted and served in the Civil War, or has it any record of any women who were in the service?” The reply came swiftly: “. . . no record of such cases is known to exist in the official files.”<sup>11</sup> The truth is that there were more than 400 such cases.

There is a reason that I and most students in the United States have never learned these stories. The true answer to Ida Tarbell's question reveals a history of resistance in which women challenged essentialist gender categories and outwitted, outperformed, and killed men. As such, this history confirms what most women already know: women's subordinate place in society is not in any way natural, and women have never accepted it.

Mathias de Sousa's career trajectory shows that slavery and racism were not the product of “hate” or even inhumane ignorance, but hundreds of years of economic and political design. It demonstrates that racial delineations were not firm in early America. They were unstable legal and social categories, constructed and reworked for

projects of capital accumulation, colonialism, and white domination that continue today.

In 2017 I joined Jack Hitt and Gimlet Media as co-host and executive producer of a new podcast devoted to telling stories like de Sousa's and Tarbell's. It is called *Uncivil* and it aims to explode the misconceptions and myths so many Americans have about the Civil War, slavery, and what those things have to do with contemporary America. The reverence for Confederate monuments and other "Lost Cause" propaganda currently shared by violent ethno-nationalists and high-level politicians reveals a deep commitment to an impoverished history.

In every society, powerful classes, groups, and individuals have reasons to suppress and censor certain kinds of history. The term "censored media" brings to mind discrete instances of pulled news reports, banned books and films, and redacted sentences on government white papers. But whole traditions of oppression, and entire legacies of resistance, like the black radical tradition, the American labor struggle, and the disability rights movement, are conspicuously absent from our popular collective memory.

When histories of resistance are suppressed, they are more challenging to recover than specific incidents. Even when historians and media producers are able to bring pivotal moments of revolutionary struggle to a broader public, those moments are too often cast as exceptional or random. Henry Highland Garnet's speech at the National Negro Convention of 1843 in which he exhorted his enslaved brethren to "arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties" can be understood as an inspiring anomaly. In truth, there were countless slave rebellions before 1861 and many similar speeches at some 200 conventions or meetings over the course of seven decades. Isolated from their roots and continuing legacy, traditions of struggle can wither.

The term "censorship" points to absences in our dominant historical narratives, curricula, and media. But those absences are hidden by the presence of other kinds of histories. The history of black American revolutionary solidarity with anti-colonial struggles in the Global South has been replaced with compelling individual stories of "achievement," which allow the powerful to celebrate diversity while bolstering false narratives of American progress.

When censored history is institutionalized in this way, it no longer requires the conscious or explicit ideological intention of any actor. Written into monuments, textbooks, films, flags, and the common language of “broken systems” or “founding principles,” censored history becomes commonplace and even revered. It hides its face as propaganda and reproduces sexism, white domination, ableism, and other forms of oppression through people who may not be consciously bigoted or who may even side with the oppressed. It conceals economic interests that have had a crucial effect on history and its recounting, and it obscures major divisions within groups popularly portrayed as homogeneous; consider, for instance, how few popular histories even mention the massive transfer of land from poor white farmers to wealthy white planters that preceded the Civil War. With censored history’s oppressive architecture silently erected, those who would pass down that history need only follow institutional norms and the paths of least resistance.

The stories we tell on *Uncivil* attempt to challenge this, but building explicit politics into an ad-funded narrative-nonfiction podcast is unwieldy business. *Uncivil*’s form is public radio-style nonfiction while its ethos is one of critical historiography.

There is no magic formula for creating *Uncivil*, but in contributing to a larger movement of critical pedagogy there are some practices that we have found useful and effective.

We tell listeners explicitly that they have been lied to, and that the truth is radical, knowable, and much more exciting. Our first episode, “The Raid,” tackled the most successful covert operation of the Civil War, an attack led by a black woman and a regiment of mostly African American soldiers.<sup>12</sup> Told with the help of young living descendants of the soldiers and with research conducted by local historians, the piece functions as an essential oral archive, rendering this history as vivid and intimate.

We place the politics of history and memory at the center of the storytelling. Our fourth episode, “The Spin”—a favorite among listeners—treats the Lost Cause version of Civil War history as a 150-year public relations victory.<sup>13</sup>

Our show is character-driven, but through lived experience our characters show us structural oppression and collective resistance

to it. Episode 2, “The Deed,” begins at the conclusion of the Civil War. It tells the story of an African American woman named Nettye Handy and her as-yet-unsuccessful struggle to reclaim land on Sapelo Island.<sup>14</sup> In “The Deed,” historians, residents, and Gullah historians like Cornelia Bailey demonstrate how racial capitalism resurfaces in each era using extralegal violence to accomplish what it cannot accomplish through law. More importantly, it shows how black land-owners have continually resisted this. Episode 7, “The Sentence,” revisits the slow, intentional establishment of repressive laws that broke from English common law to create distinctly American racial categories that perpetuate various forms of injustice.<sup>15</sup>

Our current economic, political, and cultural reality, with its war-friendly, gendered, raced, capitalist character, is the product of censored histories. *Uncivil* was our attempt to see if we could use the techniques of investigative journalism, critical scholarship, oral history, and audio documentary to revive the histories occluded by censorship, and to create a wide community of citizens who can push history forward based on that knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

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CHENJERAI KUMANYIKA is a researcher, journalist, and artist who works as an assistant professor in Rutgers University’s Department of Journalism and Media Studies. His research and teaching focus on the intersections of social justice and emerging media in the cultural and creative industries. He is the co-executive producer and co-host of *Uncivil*, Gimlet Media’s new podcast on the Civil War. He has also been a contributor to Transom, NPR’s *Code Switch* podcast, *All Things Considered*, *Invisibilia*, and *Vice*, and he is a news analyst for *Rising Up with Sonali*, hosted by Sonali Kolhatkar.

## HOW TO READ THE NEWS LIKE A POET

J. Spagnolo and Elle Aviv Newton

If you’re apathetic about reading the news, you’re in the majority. According to a study by the Media Insight Project, roughly six out of ten Americans don’t read beyond the headlines.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, this makes sense: the news forces us to acknowledge daily the harsh realities of environmental destruction, war, systemic injustice, and corruption. This is important truth-telling, because the more aware and engaged a people are, the more powerful their actions might be. Still,

who *wants* to be that witness to depravity? Who wants to keep confronting trauma? A common reaction to the news is a real and fervent desire to push it away—to shake off the complicities and complexities of the current moment.

Even if you're reading the news, you may have trouble finding content you trust. When news stories fail to connect to wider narratives, they preclude the public's ability to understand the complexities of the world's issues. For example, in a typical newspaper, economic and environmental sections exist independently of each other, even though environmental degradation is intricately linked with industry. Further, communities that face systematic injustice, such as communities of color, LGBTQ people, women, undocumented immigrants, and the poor and working class, regularly see their oppressions reinforced or neglected by the media platforms employed to tell *everyone's* stories. When journalism fails to fundamentally seek out and articulate these connections, the work is incomplete.

Still, apathy is no solution. P.T. Barnum wrote, "He who is without a newspaper is cut off from his species."<sup>18</sup> Even if we stop reading the news, the world continues unfolding around us. The structures of power continue to cause incredible amounts of pain. The world continues to want for a legion of informed advocates.

So, the question remains: How can we witness a painful news cycle and still maintain the hope and resilience needed to pursue a better world?

In founding *Poets Reading the News*, we came upon an age-old response: Poetry is an incredible way for cultures to process violence, complexity, political change, and loss. *Poets Reading the News* is a newspaper written entirely by poets, distributed online and soon also in books.<sup>19</sup> Hundreds of talented poets have covered critical events in local, national, and international news. With the power of the genre we call "journalism in verse," poets claim their own subjective truths, link previously isolated stories, and create more integrated understandings of the world.

As an example of what this approach can achieve, take a look at our extensive gun violence coverage.<sup>20</sup> After the deadly shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, high school students and teachers wrote about the difficulty of abiding by lesson plans amidst active-

shooter drills. Parents wrote about the futility and fear they felt while discussing gun violence with their children. After the historic March for Our Lives, many wrote in with their ideas, frustrations, and hopes for gun control. This is an emotional archive that carries historical import: these poets have captured how it feels to live through recurrent gun violence and political ineptitude in America.

As another example, the poem below, published on May 2, 2017, demonstrates how poetry can serve as a vehicle for truth-telling.

What is Family Detention?

by Abigail Carl-Klassen

A federal judge says it's suspended. The 21 day maximum stay is for processing, not detention.

The news says there are three remaining family holding facilities in the nation.

Google Maps says it's Leesport, Pennsylvania.

The for-profit prison administrator says it's a job creator.

Immigration and Custom Enforcement says it's a family residential center effective for maintaining family unity.

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services wants to say it's a licensed childcare facility.

Google Maps says it's Karnes City, Texas.

The ACLU and Grassroots Leadership says it's baby jail.

The public affairs representative says it's meeting our government partner's stated needs with dignity and safety.

The Texas House and Senate want to say it's exempt from childcare facility licensing requirements.

Google Maps says it's Dilley, Texas.

The American Academy of Pediatrics says it's inappropriate for children.

Border Patrol says it's getting the job done.

412 people call it home, for now.

Through this work, Carl-Klassen presented a variety of narratives about family detention. Not only are some statements contradictory, there's also an obvious abstraction: few of the statements concern the

families at the heart of the issue, families whose words are noticeably absent. Carl-Klassen critiques not only the institution of family detention but also the discussion around it.

Poetry takes many forms, but above all it relies on creativity, which is a vehicle for hope. As poets rearrange language, erase words from news articles and press releases, and bring together history and the present, they are reconfiguring the news. Poetry compels critical thinking by rewarding those who re-read. Unlike many news articles, which are designed to be understood quickly, poetry asks its readers to look deeper and to question their assumptions.

It's through this confluence of active creativity, community connection, and fierce reckoning that we as writers and readers are changing the top-down approach of journalism. *Poets Reading the News* hands the megaphone to those who have something to say and to those who need to find safe and thoughtful spaces for expression. As a tool for both emotional processing and for reflective conversation, we believe poetry is uniquely situated to help heal the trauma of the world's many divides. At the same time, we believe this work contains essential teachings about the value of independent investigation, critical thought, media literacy, and creative expression. Contact us at [editors@poetsreadingthenews.com](mailto:editors@poetsreadingthenews.com) or visit us online at [www.PoetsReadingTheNews.com](http://www.PoetsReadingTheNews.com). This is a place for people who seek to more profoundly engage with the world's pressing issues.

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ELLE AVIV NEWTON, a fourth-generation Oaklander, is the co-founder and editor of *Poets Reading the News*. She's also an art curator and regular contributor to KPFA Radio. She holds degrees in history and art criticism from Mills College.

J. SPAGNOLO is an activist, cultural producer, and poet living in California. Spagnolo has shared poetry through radio shows, film festivals, podcasts, and events around the country, and currently co-directs *Poets Reading the News*.

## **ACT OUT!**

Eleanor Goldfield

“What can I do?” has to be the most common question I’ve gotten in my 15+ years of activism, with a close second being, “Why bother?”

Think of our body politic as an actual body made sick and beaten down by the actions of our oligarchical capitalist system. There are treatments and cures, but they are mostly ignored, censored, repressed, or otherwise shut down and shut up so as to maintain a sickly status quo. This status quo has a vested interest in also ensuring the disconnect between mind and body—or rather, the people and the structure of their sociopolitical lives. From behind a flimsy façade—a mirage democracy of smoke, mirrors, and flags—we observe politics as distant, disconnected spectators. We address sociopolitical ailments with vacant *laissez-faire* or a mild concern synonymous with treating cancer by tweeting about it. Not enough of us feel directly affected by the vicious diseases ravaging our rights, our lives. In spite of this, we are no less affected. That body politic is as much mine as it is yours as it is the white nationalist’s in Kentucky, the immigrant’s in Arizona, the oil rig worker’s in Louisiana, the water protector’s in Pennsylvania, and the political prisoner’s in solitary confinement.

As a journalist and an activist, my aim is to combat this systemic disconnect that pulls the people from their own self-determination—a bit like a citizen personal trainer. Having been a personal trainer as well, I know that you can’t change your body until you get to know and accept your body. With politics it’s no different. We have to see how we fit into the suffering in Puerto Rico, how the bombs dropped in Yemen implicate us, how the bullshit infotainment peddled as news misinforms and divides us, and how the prisons built on Superfund sites compromise us. From there, we have to own it. We have to recognize that it is not up to others, particularly elected officials, to better the body politic. It is up to us.

Czech philosopher Jan Patočka called this idea “the solidarity of the shaken.”<sup>21</sup> It’s the notion that once we let go of the buoys of blind optimism, blind faith in officials, the system, or any other sociopolitical “higher power,” we can actually and legitimately stand with each other. It will not be a steady or comfortable foundation, but it will be a real one—and one from which we can pointedly and powerfully act.

The history of people’s victories is written on this unsteady ground. And today, people continue this work: of building and fighting together, of squaring with the ills of this system and conceiving of something better.



The goal of *Act Out!* is to highlight this work while simultaneously placing it in the context of the raw, uncensored, unredacted realities of our sick body politic. The show attempts to answer both of those permanently pressing questions: “What can I do?” and “Why bother?” It is there to build a bridge between caring and doing and to engage people who feel it’s useless to fight. We cover stories that corporate media will never touch. Since you’re holding this book, you have a rough idea of what kind of stories those are: the kind that don’t fit into the capitalist confines of a consumerist infotainment paradigm built to manufacture consent on behalf of the powers that be. By bringing to light those censored, redacted, and ignored stories, we aim to expose as a means to engage.

It’s not about converting people—after all, progress isn’t a church. Rather, it’s about exposure. It’s about ripping that flimsy façade apart, but it is also about exposing the work of fighting and building. Indeed, highlighting the creative ways that people are building while resisting is the powerful and necessary follow-up to exposing the empire. It introduces us to alternatives, asks us to question, dares us to dream. For instance, why can’t an abandoned parking lot be a community garden that promotes food sovereignty in marginalized communities? Another question outside the conventional confines of polite conversation: Why do we need cops? Are guns bad or is it the culture around them? By questioning the status quo, the smoke and mirrors begin to fade. By creatively considering alternatives, we bypass the abyss of nihilistic apathy and instead find the urge to build.

What that looks like is different in every community we’ve covered on the show. The objective isn’t uniformity or indeed any kind of manufactured unity. The goal is solidarity. The goal is giving a fuck and doing something while accepting that it won’t be perfect, easy, or anything like *V for Vendetta*. It will be fun and depressing, and it’ll be hard work—from actively informing ourselves and bringing to light censored stories and their storytellers, to digging past programmed ideas for progress into deeper creative dreams of what could be, beyond the horizon of a capitalist empire in decline. It will require supporting each other in our work, dodging infighting and infiltration, and bucking the calls for purity, both in our movements and in society. It will entail striving with no guarantee of success. But as

Chris Hedges has stated, “I do not fight fascists because I will win. I fight fascists because they are fascists.”<sup>22</sup> When we fight, when we build, we sustain hope. And we trigger the best in humanity—the qualities that overthrew kings, that looked at undefeated power and found a way to defeat it.

The most pressing questions therefore aren’t “What can I do?” or “Why bother?” but rather “What should we build?” and “Who’s with me?”

*Act Out!* airs weekly online via occupy.com and every weekend on Free Speech TV.

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ELEANOR GOLDFIELD is a creative activist and journalist. In addition to hosting *Act Out!*, she writes for several alternative media outlets, assists in local organizing, facilitates trainings, and performs spoken word, music, and visual projections. Find her at ArtKillingApathy.com.

STEVE MACEK, who edited and compiled this chapter, is Professor of Communication and Chair of the Department of Communication and Media Studies at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois. He is the author of *Urban Nightmares: The Media, the Right, and the Moral Panic over the City* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006), and his op-eds and essays about the media, politics, and free speech issues have been published in a wide range of magazines and newspapers, including *Z Magazine*, *St. Louis Journalism Review*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Columbus Dispatch*, and *News & Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina).

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