CHAPTER 2

Déjà Vu All Over Again
What Happened to Previous Censored Stories

STEVE MACEK and ZACH MCNANNA

Starting in the mid-1990s, Project Censored published an annual Déjà Vu chapter reviewing the fate of underreported news stories featured in previous years’ Top 25 lists. The chapter explored the stories’ subsequent developments, investigated whether they had received any corporate or independent news coverage, and gauged the extent to which they had become part of the “broader public discourse.” While a few of those stories would end up receiving more corporate media attention, the bulk of the stories continued to be ignored and underreported except by the independent press. The last edition of Project Censored’s yearbook to contain a Déjà Vu chapter was Censored 2017, the fortieth anniversary edition.

Happily, Déjà Vu is back after a four-year hiatus. This chapter provides updates on five stories from the past decade, including significant developments, substantial changes in the amount of media attention the stories have received, or both. From Censored 2011, we look back at story #2, on Pentagon pollution. From Censored 2018, we update story #10, on global internet shutdowns; and story #17, on the pioneering climate change lawsuit
Juliana v. US. From Censored 2019, we review story #19, on $21 trillion in government accounting errors. Finally, we reflect on story #25 from Censored 2020, regarding the serious privacy concerns raised by Google’s Screenwise Meter.

These were not the only stories from recent Censored volumes we reinvestigated. For instance, we reviewed story #10 from Censored 2020, on the Pentagon’s use of social media data to predict the outbreak of domestic protests. However, we were unable to find any additional coverage of this terrifying initiative in either the establishment media or the independent press. Similarly, we were unable to find any further reporting by any news organization about Censored 2020’s story #17, on the high unemployment rate among former prisoners.

Some of the stories we looked into have recently received considerable coverage from corporate news outlets—notably, the story about the trillions of dollars in governmental accounting errors, and the story about Juliana v. US—yet even then, the establishment media’s reporting on the stories has far too often left out essential facts or context crucial to meaningful analysis. And, as usual, many of the previous stories we explored have been the subject of important new reporting by independent journalists even as they continue to be overlooked or minimized by the corporate press.
Censored 2011 #2

**US Department of Defense is the Worst Polluter on the Planet**


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**Faculty Evaluators:** Ana I. Segovia (Complutense University of Madrid), Julie Flohr and Myrna Goodman (Sonoma State University), Elliot D. Cohen (Indian River State College), and Julie Andrzejewski (St. Cloud State University)

In 2010, several independent news reports revealed that the US military was “the most egregious and widespread” polluter on the planet, and Project Censored identified the story as the second most important and underreported of the year. Sara Flounders of the International Action Center observed at the time that the Pentagon was “the largest institutional user of petroleum products and energy in general,” consuming some 320,000 barrels of oil per day according to official records, and a major contributor of the greenhouse gases scientists believe are
responsible for climate change. Indeed, according to Steve Kretzmann of Oil Change International, the first five years of the Iraq War generated the equivalent of some 141 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, emitting more than 60 percent of all the countries in the world.¹

As the Censored 2011 summary detailed, the US military has consistently been shielded from responsibility for its environmentally destructive activities. During the Kyoto Accords negotiations in December 1997, the United States demanded as a condition for signing that its military operations worldwide be exempt from requirements to reduce or even measure the fossil fuels they consume. In 2001 the Bush administration refused to sign the agreement even with the exemption, and Congress passed a provision ensuring the US military’s exemption from any energy use reductions that might ultimately be negotiated. An executive order signed by President Barack Obama in 2009 continued the military’s exemption, even as it required other federal agencies to cut their greenhouse gas emissions 20 percent by the year 2020.

Releasing huge amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere is not the only way the Pentagon has contributed to environmental degradation. The American military has also contaminated large swaths of Asia and the Middle East with tens of thousands of pounds of highly toxic depleted uranium, polluted Southeast Asia with poisonous dioxin that is still causing cancers and birth defects four decades after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, and left behind rusting barrels of chemicals, solvents, and millions of rounds of ammunition at bases throughout the world.

As an example of the Pentagon’s ongoing pollution of
the planet, Project Censored in 2010 highlighted the way that a proposed $15 billion military buildup in the unincorporated US territory of Guam threatened the island’s fragile ecology and fresh water supply, a move with devastating consequences for its Indigenous people, for the coral reefs surrounding the island, and for several endangered species whose habitat would be destroyed.

**Update**

In an October 10, 2019 article published by Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), Joshua Cho argued that a decade after Project Censored first spotlighted this story, the full facts surrounding the Pentagon’s ongoing and rampant pollution of the environment continue to go unreported.²

Cho observed that two major studies about US military contributions to global climate change published in 2019 were largely ignored by the corporate press. The first, “Pentagon Fuel Use, Climate Change, and the Cost of War,” released by Brown University’s Costs of War Project, confirmed that the military has been responsible for the equivalent of some 1.2 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide since 2001, more than any other agency of the federal government.³ The second, an article published in the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* entitled “Hidden Carbon Costs of the ‘Everywhere War’: Logistics, Geopolitical Ecology, and the Carbon Bootprint of the US Military,” found that if the US military were a country, its fuel usage would make it the 47th biggest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world, ahead of Sweden and Portugal.⁴
According to Cho’s research, none of the explosive revelations contained in these two studies were covered by corporate media like the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, ABC, CBS, or CNN in the four months from June 1 to October 1, 2019. Independent news outlets such as the *Washington Examiner*, *The Nation*, and The Real News Network covered the Costs of War study and the *Daily Mail* and ScienceDaily covered the findings of the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* article. Since the publication of Cho’s FAIR piece, there has been no further coverage of either study in either the establishment or the independent press.

Meanwhile, an important component of the original 2010 Project Censored synopsis of this story—the devastating impact of the military buildup in Guam—has been all but ignored by corporate news organizations. While establishment news outlets have occasionally acknowledged that the coral reefs and other aspects of the flora and fauna of Guam are being degraded, such reports usually fail to identify the US Armed Forces as the primary cause of the ecological destruction. In December 2018, the popular science magazine *National Geographic*, currently co-owned by the National Geographic Society and the Walt Disney Company, did publish an article by Alexandra Ossola on the threat posed to biodiversity by base expansion on the island. Other than that, the only substantive documentation of how the US military’s presence in Guam is hurting the local ecosystem—or of how local Indigenous and environmental activists are fighting back—has come from the progressive magazine *The Nation* and the conservationist website Mongabay.

To be fair, even though the corporate media have gen-
eraly ignored damning stories like the one about the Pentagon’s massive carbon footprint, over the past decade establishment news outlets have occasionally reported on the specific ecological consequences of military activity for communities located near domestic military installations. For instance, on March 14, 2019 the *New York Times* ran a lengthy article detailing the Pentagon’s efforts to pressure the Environmental Protection Agency into loosening standards governing acceptable levels of groundwater pollution in a bid to evade cleanup costs at bases in Florida and elsewhere. But such coverage has been the exception rather than the rule. Generally, corporate media deal with this topic episodically at best and fail to provide the public with complete and accurate information about the US military’s responsibility for pollution on a global scale.

**Censored 2018 #10**

**2016: A Record Year for Global Internet Shutdowns**


**Student Researcher:** Hugo Sousa (Citrus College)

**Faculty Evaluator:** Andy Lee Roth (Citrus College)
Governments throughout the world shut down internet access more than fifty times in 2016, Lyndal Rowlands reported for the Inter Press Service (IPS) in December of that year. Those shutdowns limited freedom of speech, skewed elections, and damaged economies in the process. “In the worst cases,” Rowlands wrote, “internet shutdowns have been associated with human rights violations,” as happened in Ethiopia and Uganda.

As Kevin Collier reported for Vocativ, digital rights organization Access Now documented 53 instances in 2016 in which national governments shut down the internet for all or part of a country, “throttled” access speeds to make the internet essentially unusable, or blocked specific websites. These 53 cases represented a sharp uptick from the fifteen shutdowns identified by Access Now the previous year. As Collier noted, Access Now uses a “conservative metric,” counting “repeated, similar outages”—like those which occurred during Gabon’s widely criticized internet “curfew”—as a single instance.

Many countries intentionally blacked out internet access during elections and to quell protest. Not only did these shutdowns restrict freedom of speech, they also hurt economies throughout the world. TechCrunch, IPS, and other independent news organizations reported that internet shutdowns cost countries $2.4 billion between July 2015 and June 2016. The biggest losses were in India (an estimated $968 million), Saudi Arabia ($465 million), and Morocco ($320 million).

As Deji Olukotun, a senior manager at Access Now, told IPS, one way to stop government shutdowns is for internet service providers to resist government demands. He also called on international organizations—including
the International Telecommunications Union, which is the UN agency for information and communication technologies—to issue statements in response to specific incidents.

On July 1, 2016, in a nonbinding resolution signed by more than seventy countries, the UN Human Rights Council lauded the internet’s “great potential to accelerate human progress,” and condemned “measures to intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online.” The United Nations’s special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye, told Al Jazeera that advocates of online rights “need to be constantly pushing for laws that protect this space and demand that governments meet their obligations in digital spaces just as in non-digital spaces.”

Corporate news coverage of internet shutdowns in 2015–2016 tended to focus on specific countries, especially ones in Africa. Although this coverage made passing reference to Access Now’s findings on internet disruptions around the world, it rarely explored the implications of those findings in depth. Corporate media reports about this story tended not to address the larger, global scope of internet shutdowns—and, unlike independent news coverage, these reports often did not discuss how internet providers might resist government demands or mention the actions taken by the United Nations to address this issue.

**Update**

Since Project Censored originally spotlighted this story, the rate of government interference with internet service
throughout the world has accelerated dramatically. A new study by Access Now published in July 2019 documents 196 internet shutdowns in 2018, nearly quadrupling the 53 they reported in 2016. These 196 internet shutdowns occurred in 25 countries, with 134 shutdowns occurring in India alone. In 2019, Access Now documented 213 shutdowns in 33 countries. These blackouts have led to reported commercial losses of $2.5 billion in Iran over the past decade, $3 billion in India between 2012 and 2017, $1.4 billion in Kashmir between August and December of 2019, and many smaller losses, such as an estimated $17 million in Zimbabwe over just a three-day period in January 2019.

The increase in the number and severity of internet shutdowns has brought with it a rise in corporate media coverage. In late 2019 and early 2020, the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and a host of other major establishment news outlets published stories about internet shutdowns. While the issue of government interference with internet access is starting to gain attention, it is worth emphasizing that the delay in coverage allowed hundreds of shutdowns that occurred prior to 2019 to go mostly unreported.

Even more interesting to consider is which countries the corporate press chose to focus on in their reporting about this issue. Despite experiencing relatively few internet shutdowns in 2019, Iran was the subject of a disproportionate number of establishment media reports on the topic, usually in connection with the Iranian government blocking internet service during times of civil unrest and mass protest. A significant number of the corporate media’s reports about Iran’s suppression of online speech came just weeks before (and after) the US assassination of Iranian General
Qasem Soleimani. On the other hand, US ally India was responsible for hundreds of shutdowns in 2018 and 2019, yet corporate news outlets paid far less attention to shutdowns in India than they did to shutdowns in Iran.\footnote{13}

India-based activist group Software Freedom Law Centre has reported an astonishing 180 internet shutdowns since 2012 in the Indian-occupied region of Kashmir, including the longest recorded shutdown in history, beginning August 4, 2019 and ending January 26, 2020.\footnote{14} Moreover, the restoration of internet service that was permitted after January 26 was only partial, allowing users in the area to access just 301 government-approved websites and limiting mobile internet speeds.\footnote{15} One of the few corporate news dispatches regarding India’s digital quarantine of Kashmir was a \textit{Washington Post} article, “India’s Internet Shutdown in Kashmir is the Longest Ever in a Democracy,” published on December 15, 2019, that surveyed the impact of the blackout on ordinary people in the region.\footnote{16} The article described citizens taking daily seventy-mile train journeys to areas with internet access, doctors cut off from their patients, students falling behind in online classes, and online businesses losing customers and revenue as a result of the shutdown.

Modern democratic societies rely on unfettered access to online communication. So, in fact, do news outlets of all kinds, both corporate and independent. While it is heartening that the corporate media have finally awoken to the alarming frequency and scope of government interference with people’s use of the internet throughout the world, it is troubling that they have not devoted more attention to US allies like India who are responsible for the bulk of the world’s internet shutdowns.
In September 2015, 21 young environmental activists represented by Eugene, Oregon-based advocacy group Our Children’s Trust sued the federal government and President Barack Obama for knowingly endangering their lives by failing to do enough to prevent climate change. According to the suit, now known as Juliana v. US, the defendants “deliberately allow[ed] atmospheric CO₂ concentrations to escalate to levels unprecedented in human history,” thus violating their constitutional rights. As James Conca noted in his Forbes article on the case, the lawsuit’s assertion that the federal government has an obligation to protect the “natural systems required for the people’s survival” was the first of its kind.

Three fossil fuel trade associations, including the American Petroleum Institute, initially attempted to intervene...
in the lawsuit, alleging it constituted a “direct, substantial threat to [their] businesses,” although by June 2017 they were no longer defendants in the suit.

Following pre-trial hearings, US District Court Judge Thomas Coffin in April 2016 rejected Justice Department motions to have the case dismissed. In doing so, he found that the government is subject to public trust doctrine and a “trustee” of the natural resources people depend on for “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

In November 2016, US District Court Judge Ann Aiken affirmed Coffin’s ruling, clearing the way for the case to go to trial. In February 2017, the plaintiffs updated their suit to name President Donald Trump as a defendant in place of Obama. As Censored 2018 went to press in summer 2017, lawyers for the young environmental activists sought to depose Trump’s then–Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, former CEO of ExxonMobil, and were preparing for a trial projected to begin in the autumn of 2017.

As Project Censored observed in its original write-up, in autumn 2015 corporate news coverage of the pioneering lawsuit was scant, with the lone exception being MSNBC’s November 2015 report framing the case as “long on symbolism” and “unlikely to win.” However, by the spring and summer of 2016, CBS, Fox News, Forbes, and The Atlantic had also reported about the lawsuit.

**Update**

Since appearing in Censored 2018, Juliana v. US gradually received more establishment media attention as the suit slowly made its way through the courts. In the three years since the story of the lawsuit originally broke, the New
York Times, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, PBS, and CBS have all done updates on the case. Most notably, CBS has run two 60 Minutes specials detailing the young plaintiffs involved, the case’s progress, and the attention it has received in legal and environmental circles.

The trial was originally set to begin in October 2017. However, the Trump administration appealed Judge Aiken’s 2016 ruling three times to the Ninth Circuit Court in California, and twice to the US Supreme Court, on the grounds that the lawsuit was “misguided” because there is no constitutional right to “a stable climate,” and that the remedies being sought were not viable. In each instance, the government’s appeal was denied, meaning that the case was poised to go to trial sometime in 2020 despite numerous attempts to delay the proceedings.

Then, on January 17, 2020, a panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals on a 2–1 vote threw out the case for lack of standing. In his majority opinion Judge Andrew Hurwitz wrote that the young plaintiffs had “made a compelling case that action is needed,” but added that “such relief is beyond our constitutional power.” The lawsuit’s dismissal was covered by the New York Times, Time, and several other establishment news organizations.

If the plaintiffs had won their landmark suit, the implications would have been enormous. Our Children’s Trust was asking to “get the federal government out of the business of in any way subsidizing fossil fuels and get them into the business of dramatically curtailing greenhouse gases,” as professor of environmental law at UCLA Ann Carlson put it. Carlson observed that “there have been court decisions that have asked governments to do very dramatic things. This might be the biggest.”
During the protracted legal wrangling over the case, op-eds and commentaries published by numerous media outlets offered diverse perspectives on the validity of the young activists’ arguments and the larger philosophical issues *Juliana* raised. The case sparked heated exchanges regarding the rights of citizens to a healthy environment, the rights of children to a viable future, the validity of claims on behalf of future persons, and the responsibilities of corporations and our government to preserve an environment capable of sustaining human civilization.

An *In These Times* piece by progressive journalist Arun Gupta offered a balanced but hopeful account of the case, discussing the constitutional justifications for the arguments made on behalf of the plaintiffs.²² Gupta noted that, “[w]hile the right to a ‘stable climate system’ is not enumerated in the Constitution, the Ninth Amendment states that other rights exist even if not listed.”

On the other hand, center-right political website The Hill published a commentary by law professor Donald J. Kochan arguing that the demands made by the young environmental activists in their lawsuit are unconstitutional.²³ Kochan claimed that it is not the job of the judicial system to force the legislative branch into action.

Though the coverage by corporate news media and media commentary surrounding *Juliana* did pick up considerably in 2019 and 2020, the attention it received arguably failed to match the magnitude of the case. Given the potential consequences of even a partial victory for the environmental activists in this lawsuit, one would have expected *Juliana v. US* to have dominated the headlines rather than receiving the intermittent coverage it was allotted.

On March 3, 2020, Our Children’s Trust petitioned the
Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals to convene a new panel of eleven judges to reconsider the January ruling. Twenty amicus curiae (friend of the court) briefs have been filed in support of the petition, including one from the National League of Women Voters and one submitted by twenty-four members of the US Congress. Yet even if the court decides to review and overturn their earlier decision, allowing the lawsuit at long last to go to trial, the corporate media’s interest in properly covering the story remains to be seen.

Censored 2019 #16

$21 Trillion in Unaccounted-for Government Spending from 1998 to 2015


Student Researcher: Andrea Fekete (North Central College)
Faculty Evaluator: Steve Macek (North Central College)

The sixteenth story on Project Censored’s Top 25 list for 2018–2019 was stunning: according to a study conducted by Michigan State University Professor of Economics Mark Skidmore, two federal agencies—the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)—had together accumulated as much as $21 trillion in unaccounted-for expenditures.
This news received little corporate media attention when it first broke but has since become the focus of countless establishment newspaper articles and broadcast news packages—yet, as explained below, much of that reporting continues to ignore the main thrust of Skidmore’s research.

After overhearing HUD’s Assistant Secretary Catherine Austin Fitts reference a report that showed the Army had $6.5 trillion in inadequately documented budget adjustments in fiscal year 2015, Skidmore worked with Fitts and two graduate students to comb through reports from the websites of HUD and the DoD in an effort to find additional unaccounted-for spending. In one of these reports, Skidmore discovered an appendix showing a transfer of $800 billion from the US Treasury to the Army (which at the time had an authorized annual budget of only $122 billion). As MSU Today reported, Skidmore’s queries to the Office of Inspector General about the discrepancy went unanswered, and at one point the OIG disabled the links to documents he was studying.

Shortly after Skidmore’s findings went public, the Pentagon announced it would undergo its first-ever audit. The announced audit was to begin in 2018 and audits were projected to occur annually. RT’s story on the audit quoted the Defense Department’s Comptroller David L. Norquist explaining that the Pentagon had hired independent account firms to audit its finances because it is important “that the Congress and the American people have confidence in DoD’s management of every taxpayer dollar.”

At the time of Censored 2019’s publication in October 2018, the only corporate media mentions of Skidmore’s findings were in two brief Forbes articles co-written by
Skidmore himself and two NPR pieces on the decision to audit the Pentagon.\textsuperscript{27}

\section*{Update}

Since \textit{Censored 2019} highlighted Mark Skidmore’s research, corporate media outlets have begun to take notice of the Pentagon’s alarming accounting issues, thanks in large part to a social media gaffe by celebrity politician Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). In a December 2, 2018 tweet, then Representative-elect Ocasio-Cortez referenced an article posted on \textit{The Nation’s} website explaining Skidmore’s findings: “$21 \text{ TRILLION of Pentagon financial transactions ‘could not be traced, documented, or explained.’}$ $21T$ in Pentagon accounting errors. Medicare for All costs $\sim$ $32T$. That means 66\% of Medicare for All could have been funded already by the Pentagon.”\textsuperscript{28}

What followed was an absolute frenzy of corporate media commentary on Ocasio-Cortez’s misinterpretation of Skidmore’s research. In the \textit{Nation} article she referenced, author Dave Lindorff explained that Skidmore’s discoveries do not imply that $21$ trillion has been spent by the Pentagon or has somehow gone missing; rather, they indicate just how bad the DoD and other federal agencies are at maintaining orderly financial records. Outlets such as the \textit{New York Times}, \textit{New York Post}, \textit{Baltimore Sun}, \textit{Daily Herald}, Associated Press, Fox News, and CNN were quick to point out and dissect Ocasio-Cortez’s mistake. \textit{The Washington Post}’s fact-checkers gave her tweet “Four Pinocchios,” a rating the paper reserves for brazen lies.\textsuperscript{29}

But not one of these news organizations followed up with
in-depth investigations of the Pentagon’s (or HUD’s) accounting errors.

One fact that Lindorff’s article revealed, which has gone relatively unnoticed due to the corporate media’s focus on Ocasio-Cortez’s error, is that the Pentagon flunked its first-ever comprehensive audit. Ernst & Young along with other private accounting firms concluded that the Department of Defense’s financial records were “riddled with so many bookkeeping deficiencies, irregularities, and errors that a reliable audit was simply impossible.” While Reuters and a few other corporate news organizations did report the story, the coverage that the failed audit received pales in comparison to the attention received by AOC’s social media misstatements.

In many ways, corporate media treatment of this story since October 2018 is a perfect example of what Project Censored calls “News Abuse,” reporting that minimizes a story’s true importance or that frames it in a propagandistic manner, thereby “abusing” the public trust. (See Chapter 4 of this volume for more on News Abuse.)

Moreover, none of the corporate media who excoriated AOC for her mistake have reported on the fact that the federal government recently adopted new regulations designed to prevent journalists and ordinary citizens from accessing exactly the sort of data Skidmore used to expose the Pentagon’s massive accounting errors. As Michele Ferri and Jonathan Lurie explained in a January 10, 2019 article published by the Solari Report, the advisory board responsible for establishing federal accounting principles has recently enacted a new Federal Accounting Standard, Standard 56, which allows the government to hide data about funds and hiring expenses that would, if made
public, threaten national security. Essentially, Standard 56 is a blanket that can be legally thrown over any accounting information the government does not want to become public.

Censored 2020 #25

**Google Screenwise: Consenting to Surveillance Capitalism**


**Student Researcher:** Fabrice Nozier (Drew University)

**Faculty Evaluator:** Lisa Lynch (Drew University)

As highlighted by the final story on *Censored 2020*’s Top 25 list, Google’s introduction of Opinion Rewards, a survey app for Android and iOS users that allows them to earn “rewards,” has raised serious new concerns about the tech giant’s invasion of users’ privacy. In exchange for very modest cash awards, which can earn users roughly $50–100 per year, Google gains access to app users’ phone screens and web browser windows. Rather than fooling users into acceding to secretive corporate “research” behind lengthy terms and conditions, Google disguises the monitoring function of Opinion Rewards as “metering”—a “funny word for surveillance,” as Sydney Li and Jason Kelley of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) pointed out.
Opinion Rewards is segmented into two distinct services, “Surveys App” and “Audience Measurement.” The first is an app that prompts users to complete surveys ranging “from opinion polls, to hotel reviews, to merchant satisfaction surveys.” The second, more invasive option requires registered households to install the Screenwise Meter mobile app and web extension which monitor internet usage. Google also encourages the installation of their “TV Meter,” which monitors television consumption through a built-in mic.

In January 2019, Google disabled the iOS version of the app because it violated Apple’s distribution policies; but Google Opinion Rewards continues to be available to Android users, who had installed it more than ten million times as of July 2019.

In February 2019, the New York Times published an editorial that reported on Google and Facebook paying people to download apps that track their phone activity and usage habits, and called for the Federal Trade Commission to “become the privacy watchdog that this era so desperately needs.” Apart from this piece, the corporate media at the time largely neglected to cover how Google’s push to “meter” the market contributes to mass surveillance.

**Update**

Even prior to the publication of Censored 2020 in October 2019, there were some important developments related to this story.

To begin with, just a few days after The Verge and the Electronic Frontier Foundation exposed Google’s
monitoring of its Screenwise app users, three US senators—Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Ed Markey (D-MA), and Josh Hawley (R-MO)—sent a letter to Hiroshi Lockheimer, Google’s senior vice president of platforms and ecosystems, demanding more information about the app. As reported in a February 7, 2019 article in Wired, the senators’ letter expressed concern that “Screenwise Meter was originally open to users as young as 13 years old, and continued to be available to the teenagers if they were registered as a part of a family group on Google Play.” The senators demanded to know what measures Google had in place to ensure that underaged participants in the Screenwise program had “verified parental consent.” They also requested an explanation for why Google had bypassed Apple’s App Store review process to distribute and run their monitoring program and wanted to know if the company had bypassed the App Store’s review process for any other non-internal apps.

Perhaps just as significant, the privacy concerns raised by the Screenwise Meter have been at the center of an ongoing and very public squabble between Google and Apple since early February 2019. On May 7, 2019 Google CEO Sundar Pichai published an op-ed in the New York Times pledging that the company “will never sell any personal information to third parties” and promising that users “get to decide how [their] information is used.” He also expressed support for “comprehensive privacy legislation” and claimed that Google has urged Congress to pass just such a law. In the process, though, Pichai took a thinly-veiled swipe at Apple, implying that the enhanced protections on iOS devices which prevent unauthorized harvesting of user data were transforming privacy into “a
luxury good offered only to people who can afford to buy premium products and services.”

It is interesting to note that in his recent public pronouncements on the issue, Google’s CEO defines the company’s promise to protect user privacy as a promise not to sell users’ personal data, rather than as a promise not to gather such data in the first place. Yet what was objectionable about Screenwise—and what got it booted out of Apple’s App Store—was not the selling of data to third parties but Google’s invasive tracking of users’ online (and offline) activities.

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Notes


14. Ibid.


stop-the-u-s-government-from-supporting-fossil-fuels-60-minutes/;


