CHAPTER 3

Manufacturing Distraction
Junk Food News and Abuse on a Feed to Know Basis

by Mickey Huff, Frances A. Capell, and Adam Bessie

Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business, largely without protest or even much popular notice. The result is that we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.

—NEIL POSTMAN, Amusing Ourselves to Death

It has been no real surprise for those paying a whit of attention that the corporate media in the United States is not in the business of news. For the past few decades, tripe has increasingly dominated the dwindling pages of newspapers, fearmongering has filled the hot airwaves of radio, and the cheap, tawdry, and bawdy now rule the 24/7 cable news broadcasts. The so-called “Most Trusted Name in News” and “Fair & Balanced” networks have become self-parodies on the verge of succumbing to their own propaganda.

This troublesome trend has been documented by Project Censored for almost three decades as well as by numerous other academics, independent journalists, and activists who have focused on what could be argued is the most problematic subject of our time: the sorry state of the supposed free press.² There are many facets to this issue facing democracy. The former dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California–Berkeley, Ben Bagdikian, tripped the alarm concerning conglomerates, consolidation brought about by deregulation, and the potential negative impact on news reporting in The Media Monopoly in 1983.³ Lo and behold, like a sage, his predictions turned out to be quite accurate, even underestimated.

The problems Bagdikian addressed are not, however, the only problems associated with the corporate news media. Today we have more outlets for information than ever before, yet fewer owners and producers of mass media. Further, a vast majority of Americans watch television
for their news (virtually a corporate and commercially dominated medium). What is reported in the most viewed news sources matters, because it helps to shape the public mindset. Control of information and censorship of sensitive yet important topics come in many guises. It is not just *what* the corporate media are not reporting that matters, it is also what they *do* report and *how* they report it. Much of this content amounts to what is called Junk Food News and News Abuse.⁴

Since Project Censored founder Dr. Carl Jensen coined the term Junk Food News almost thirty years ago, Americans have seen their news diet consistently filled with filler and fluff, creating a news-deficient society. Junk Food News stories are inane, trivial tales that amuse and distract the masses (deridingly referred to as the “Boofoisie” by early twentieth-century essayist and critic H. L. Mencken). However, it is not merely junk and distraction that Americans are treated to on their daily news menus, but also News Abuse, the reporting of important stories and issues, for all the wrong reasons and with numerous dubious detours that result in spin, distortion, and even falsehood.⁵ In fact, News Abuse helps create a state where people can no longer discern between the real and unreal—hyperreality.⁶

Around the same time that Jensen was noting the increasingly disturbing trend of Junk Food News, New York University media scholar Neil Postman warned that America was fast becoming a culture more reminiscent of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* rather than George Orwell’s *1984*.⁷ The American media landscape was a world where inanity, desire, and consumerism were fast becoming the order of the day. Said Postman in the preface of his now-classic 1985 work, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*,

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy
porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy ... In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.⁸

“This book,” Postman then concluded in the preface, “is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.”⁹ Frighteningly, that prescient passage lays the framework for our present hyperreality. This chapter explores the most significant and timely examples of Junk Food News and News Abuse in 2009–10, and examines what becomes of a culture consumed by infotainment disseminated by a corporate media hell-bent on manufacturing distraction, and suggests what we can do to change the trend of Junk Food News and News Abuse in order to realize not only a true free press, but a functioning and egalitarian democracy.

THE YEAR OF THE TIGER: SEX STILL SELLS AS JUNK FOOD NEWS

Just Do It.
—NIKE AD SLOGAN

The only stories corporate media seem to love more than those with titillating sexual or violent details are stories in which such details are wedded to scandalous exploits of celebrities. For corporate news, 2010 has indeed turned out to be the Year of the Tiger. The Tiger Woods infidelity scandal appeared on twenty consecutive covers of the New York Post, officially surpassing the tabloid’s coverage of the events of 9/11.¹⁰ Troubling as this may be, the recurrence of the story in tabloid pages is overshadowed by a far more upsetting trend in contemporary journalism. While the newsworthiness of the recent unraveling of the celebrity golfer’s public image is surely questionable, the methods the corporate media employed in reporting the story deserve immediate attention. Just as the boundary between “junk” news and real news has become increasingly blurred, in the case of Tiger Woods the line between the media’s treatment of facts and lurid, unverified gossip has almost entirely disappeared.

Not to be outdone by the clever headline “What a Dope” for last year’s top Junk Food News story involving Michael Phelps’s momentous bong load, British tabloid News of the World ran a salacious piece about a
Florida restaurant manager Mindy Lawton’s alleged affair with Woods
titled “Tiger Had Me in the Rough.”11 The article contained all the nec-
essary elements for a sensational tabloid story: Tiger’s “favourite
breakfast,” “saucy” red underpants, and detailed accounts of “frantic”
garage sex.12 While the story was packed with tawdry accusations, it was
entirely lacking in credibility. As Paul Farhi pointed out in the American
Journalism Review article “Lost in the Woods,” the News of the World item
contained no incriminating text messages, e-mails, voicemails, or even
one eyewitness to corroborate it. “Most suspicious were some of Law-
ton’s direct quotes,” wrote Farhi. “She referred to Woods as a ‘sportsman’
and a parking lot as a ‘car park,’ British locations unlikely to have been
uttered by a Florida restaurant manager.”

These questions of validity did not, however, prevent dozens of real
news outlets from retelling the tabloid tall tale. The Chicago Sun-Times,
the Miami Herald, and NBC’s Today Show all reported on the supposed
affair despite the story’s shady origins. “The thrust of Today’s reporting
on the scandal was to report what others had reported,” said Farhi. “In a
single news report on December 7, for instance, [Peter] Alexander cited
TMZ twice, News of the World’s story about Mindy Lawton, Saturday Night
Live, and the Daily Beast’s report about Woods’s alleged addiction to pre-
scription drugs.”13

Though many corroborated allegations of infidelity and vague yet
nonetheless guilty admissions from Tiger Woods himself would keep
the story afloat, the unnecessary attention granted by the media did not
go unnoticed. In the UK, when the BBC ran Tiger’s public apology as
their top story on the same day that 1,600 workers lost their jobs when
a large steel plant was shut down, the news corporation received 283 for-
mal complaints. “To have this Tiger Woods item as the main item was an
insult to those 1,600 people going home tonight in Redcar jobless, while
our main news provider concentrated on a multi-millionaire golfer who’s
been unfaithful to his wife,” wrote one viewer. Protested another, “Our
economy is in tatters, our children are dying in Afghanistan, at least
1,600 jobs are going in Teesside . . . I pay my license fee for much bet-
ter than this.”14

An article in the Christian Science Monitor titled “Yahoo! loves Tiger
Woods” pointed out that while Woods’s sponsors and fans were suffer-
ing in the midst of the scandal, the outpouring of public interest in the
story meant profit for many others. “God bless Tiger. This week we got
a huge uplift: Front Page, News, Sports, Gossip. He just filtered through

162 CENSORED 2011
the whole place,” Yahoo! Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Carol Bartz told attendees of the UBS Global Media and Communications Conference on December 8, 2009. The increased traffic for Yahoo! thanks to Tiger’s “transgressions” meant a huge increase in ad revenue for the company. “[This] is better than Michael Jackson dying,” Bartz joked, “it is kind of hard to put an ad next to a funeral.”

Maybe so, but funerals aside, there was plenty of media money to be made in the business of celebrity deaths, as will be examined in the next section.

As if the Year of the Tiger escapades were not enough, the sex scandals of the past year also involved a handful of political figures. Widespread media attention was given to the fact that former senator John Edwards had fathered a child in an extramarital affair with his aide Rielle Hunter during the democratic primaries. Though the National Enquirer ran stories on the affair in 2007, it was conveniently seized upon elsewhere in the media well after Edwards had ended his campaign. On June 16, 2009, Republican Senator John Ensign admitted to having an extramarital affair. The woman in question was Cynthia Hampton, the wife of one of his top aides. A few days later the mysterious disappearance of Republican Governor Mark Sanford was reported. Sanford initially claimed that he had been hiking in the Appalachian trail. He then admitted that he had instead been with his mistress in Argentina. Luckily for these two, immediately after their stories broke the death of Michael Jackson eclipsed their affairs in terms of media coverage.

One of the most amusing aspects of the reporting of these political sex scandals comes from Fox News’s coverage of Sanford. The network’s on-screen graphic while the Republican governor confessed to the affair labeled him as a Democrat. Fox had previously given ample attention to Sanford’s opposition to Obama’s stimulus package, when the governor was correctly identified as a Republican. The graphic could have been more readily dismissed as a mistake, had Fox not also done the same thing to former Republican Congressman Mark Foley after his notorious scandal involving male, teenage congressional pages.

While the sensationalizing of sex scandal stories does little in the way of developing properly informed and empowered members of society, the relative prioritizing of these stories is indicative of a warped sense of what the public really needs to know. On December 12, 2009, a Saturday Night Live skit delivered poignant commentary on the matter. The opening to the show depicted Sanford, Ensign, and Edwards critiquing the media’s overcoverage of the Woods scandal. “Like Tiger Woods, we
have broken our marriage vows, but in addition, as elected officials, we have also violated the public trust,” says the Ensign character. He later adds, “If I may, let me make a point here. Many of Tiger’s girlfriends were meaningless one-night stands. He barely spent any time with them. Certainly not enough to affect his work, unlike us.” And in the end, it seems the late-night laughs are on us.

GRIEF PORN: POSTMORTEM VOYEURISM AS POSTMODERN CAUSE CÉLÈBRE

No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.

—H. L. MENCKEN

When Michael Jackson died suddenly on June 25, 2009, coverage of his passing consumed mainstream media coverage like a raging wildfire. His death accounted for 18 percent of the news during the week of his death, and 17 percent for the following two weeks, according to the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism. The loss of the beloved King of Pop equaled huge financial gains for news corporations. The Magazine Information Network estimated that in the two months following Jackson’s untimely death, the magazine industry pulled in an extra $55 million. The Pew Research Center also observed that 93 percent of cable coverage studied on the Thursday and Friday following the death was about Jackson. His eighteen-hour memorial appeared live on eighteen cable and broadcast networks including ABC, NBC, and CNN, and drew in 31.1 million viewers. The Internet was also heavily impacted as word of Jackson’s demise began to spread, so much so that Google went into malware-defense mode. Searches related to Michael Jackson generated a response of: “We’re sorry, but your query looks similar to automated requests from a computer virus or spyware application.” One article went so far as to suggest in its title, “Jackson Dies, Almost Takes Internet with Him.”

Microblogging service Twitter was among the Web sites that crashed as a result of Jackson’s death. Before the crash, TweetVolume had recorded that “Michael Jackson” appeared in more than 66,500 Twitter updates. On the afternoon of June 25, according to data from Trendrr, a service that tracks social media sites, Twitter posts containing “Michael
Jackson” reached more than 100,000 per hour.23 Twitter user FoieGrasie observed: “Irony: The protesters in Iran using Twitter as com are unable to get online because of all the posts of ‘Michael Jackson RIP.’”24 The Pew Research Center found that Iran and its turbulent elections made up for 19 percent of news for the week of June 22–28, and despite Jackson’s death occurring midweek, his passing accounted for only 1 percent less for the entire week.25 Even in death, it seemed that the Michael Jackson brand, media icon and juggernaut, could not be stopped and was set to overshadow any other newsworthy events.

The 1970s actress and pinup star Farrah Fawcett died just a few hours before the King of Pop after a long battle with cancer. Before commercial breaks on CNN, the channel was flashing photos of Mark Sanford and Fawcett to keep the audience engaged. Perspectives on the Charlie’s Angels star were promised to occupy the evening’s time slots.26 That all changed when word of Jackson’s death hit the airwaves, and Fawcett’s name joined others on a list of celebrities New York Magazine calls the “Eclipsed Celebrity Death Club.” Fawcett herself was posthumously eclipsing another recent celebrity death, that of David Carradine (best known from the television series Kung Fu), though given the circumstances surrounding his death (speculated as caused by autoerotic asphyxiation), Carradine would likely have been pleased about the death of Fawcett and then Jackson, as they helped kick him off the front page, where media had been ensconced in the lurid details of his own death for weeks.27 Historically, another member of this so-called club is Groucho Marx, who died the same week as Elvis Presley.28 It is interesting to note that when Presley died in 1977, CBS News was criticized for not choosing to lead their newscast with the celebrity’s death.29 Times have clearly changed.

The death of Michael Jackson harkens back to another sensationalized death from over a decade ago, that of Princess Diana. The news coverage and public response to her passing inspired writer Mick Hume to coin the term “mourning sickness” to describe the collective condition of “recreational grieving” by individuals at the death of a celebrity.30 According to Patrick West, author of a pamphlet called Conspicuous Compassion, these public displays of mourning for strangers, also known as “grief porn” or “grief-lite,” have become an “enjoyable event, much like going to a football match or the last night of the proms.” The hyper-attentive, intrusive, and voyeuristic media coverage surrounding celebrity deaths results in a massive “inflation” of the traditional moment of silence, rendering it virtually meaningless.31
As the saga of Falcon “Balloon Boy” Heene unfolded on October 15, 2009, the corporate media dragged the public afloat with him. “A 6-year-old boy climbed into a homemade balloon aircraft and floated away Thursday,” read the opening lines to Associated Press (AP) stories and updates, “forcing officials to scramble to figure out how to rescue the boy.”32 This was widely reported by press and news agencies despite the fact that the only witness was a sibling who supposedly watched him climb inside. There was little discussion of whether or not such a balloon could actually take off and float the way that it did with a fifty-pound child inside. Only after the balloon touched down and was revealed to be empty did TV hosts stress that reports of Falcon being inside were “unverified” and began alluding to a possible hoax.33 “The authorities, and the media, believed they had a credible report that the kid had climbed aboard this weird balloon rocket that his family had constructed . . . It seemed to be a life-and-death drama as the balloon was buffeted by the winds,” wrote Washington Post media critic Howard Kurtz in defense of the excessive coverage.34

“We are not going to show impact. We will be on a delay,” CNN assured the public, and then proceeded to air the balloon crash live.35 “Not only did cable news programmers make a risky decision in covering this story live,” wrote Mediaite’s Colby Hall, “they may have inadvertently aired his death.”16 However, Falcon was discovered to be hiding in a box in the family’s attic, and suspicions were raised when he admitted during a CNN interview with Wolf Blitzer, “We did this for the show.”37 Furthermore, only after the boy was found safe was attention turned to the fact that the boy’s father, spotlight-hungry Richard Heene, had an affinity for hoaxes. Heene, who had appeared on the program Wife Swap, had unsuccessfully tried to participate in other reality shows, and posted online videos depicting a fake terror attack on the US Capitol and discussions of shapeshifting and Hillary Clinton as a human-reptile being.38 Perhaps if these things had been looked into a bit earlier, i.e., while a horrified public followed the balloon’s flight with bated breath, the sensational story
could have been dismissed in lieu of actual news. Instead, from October 15 to 18, the Balloon Boy story was the top news story, according to the Pew Research Center. Falcon Heene was the number two item of news for the entire week, second only to President Obama.39 “With record home foreclosures, the announcement that seniors would receive no cost-of-living increase in Social Security (the first time since 1975), and an Arctic ice cap now forecast to be completely melted in ten to twenty years,” wrote Janet Loughrey in a piece for the independent online OpEd News, “there was plenty to talk about . . . real journalism and real news reporting has been all but discarded.”40

A little over a month later, fame-seekers dominated news headlines once again as Washington DC couple Tareq and Michaele Salahí were admitted to a state dinner at the White House on November 24, 2009, despite not being on the guest list, and successfully hobnobbed with the elite. The Secret Service only caught on after Michaele Salahí posted pictures of herself at the event on her Facebook page. The whole ordeal lead to scrutiny of Social Secretary Desirée Rogers, who later resigned from her position.41 During the week of November 30 to December 6, the party crashers occupied 18 percent of morning news airtime studied by the Pew Research Center. Coverage often centered around the quirky couple rather than matters of White House security.42 Soon after, it was reported that the pair was vying for a spot on Bravo’s The Real Housewives of D.C. and that the show’s cameras had even captured some of the incident. Despite the fact that the couple is still under federal investigation for their gate-crashing antics, they are ultimately being rewarded with the media attention they crave.43 The Salahís appeared on the Today Show with Matt Lauer and David Letterman’s Tonight Show on May 25, 2010. It appears Michaele will star on The Real Housewives of D. C.”, and the couple is writing a tell-all book.44 With publicity stunts like those of the Salahís and the Heenes gobbling up legitimate news airtime, we can only dread the next sensational hoax that will take fame-seekers from America’s attics and turn them into America’s sweethearts.

MEANWHILE: THE CONSEQUENCES OF JUNK FOOD NEWS COVERAGE

While corporate media lavish attention on these Junk Food News subjects and their casts, real news goes underreported and largely
unnoticed. This could have a catastrophic impact on human affairs; that which we do not know can indeed affect us all.

Regardless of the plenitude of significant news stories to cover, Junk Food News remains alive and well in corporate media and continues to gorge the American populace with a high-calorie, no-news diet while it eats away at the nation’s already emaciated attention span. If this type of reporting was the most egregious among the failings of the free press, perhaps it could be more easily rectified. However, another serious problem afflicting major newsrooms is far more insidious: the propensity for News Abuse.

**NEWS ABUSE: THE PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES OF NETWORKED NEWS**

*A newspaper is a device for making the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier.*

—H. L. MENCKEN

News Abuse is not the same as Junk Food News, which Project Censored founder Carl Jensen called “junk food for the brain.” The category became part of the Project’s scope early in the new millennium when then-director Peter Phillips expanded the idea of Junk Food News to include News Abuse. This involves the actual coverage of important news stories, not fluff. However, it is the way in which corporate media go about covering a particular story that can transform an otherwise straightforward, factual news story into a form of propaganda through spin, obfuscation, distortion, omission, and even outright prevarication. Of course, corporate media outlets can then claim a particular story or topic has been reported, and that it has not been censored. Yet, upon deeper examination, one often discovers that the facts in a particular story in question have been abused, transformed into something other than what the original report encompassed, perhaps something more distracting or titillating, or more confusing. Hence, the need for the category of analysis called News Abuse. Along with the proliferation of Junk Food News, this growing problem can be much harder to detect. News Abuse must be more carefully deconstructed so the public can become aware of the levels of deception that are afoot in the corporate press. The following provides a framework from which to understand the significance and many guises of News Abuse.
We Are the Corporate Media

The scene is set. A perfectly coiffed evening anchor sits in a generic corporate news studio prepared to deliver BREAKING NEWS—this news, however, is not breaking from the teleprompter, but comes from a Tweet fresh off a smartphone that the anchor is staring at, rather than the camera. With Walter Cronkite-esque gravitas, the anchor solemnly proclaims, “Your friend can’t decide which sandwich to eat for lunch.” After a dramatic pause, as if to let the “news” soak in, the anchor stares into the camera with a well-polished parody of melodramatic reporterly ethos, announcing that this program is “Giving you the news that matters to you.”

While CNN has not taken to reading a friend’s lunch habits on the air—not yet, at least—this Motorola advertisement captures the darker side of the new participatory media landscape, one in which people use their newfound power to “be the media,” not to question the Junk Food News that is sold, but to collude with corporate media in the creation and distribution of it through social networks. With the rise of participatory media, are people now no longer consumers, but also peddlers of Junk Food News, and more broadly, the ideological spin of corporate news? Are We the People now active participants in a News Abuse cycle? And if so, what does this mean in terms of a free press?

Perils of Parody Meet Reality

We have passed through the age of network news, where information was transmitted directly from media source to the consumer, and have entered the age of Networked News, in which our social networks are integral to how we experience news. In their March 2010 report, “How Internet and Cell Phone Users Have Turned News Into a Social Experience,” the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism shows that rather than simply wait for the evening news, we “hunt and gather” from TV, Internet, radio, and, although less so now, newspapers, across multiple sources. We are now more diverse in our informational habits—and through our social networks, we share this information with friends, family, colleagues, and acquaintances across the world. Nearly three-quarters of those online get news from friends through e-mail or social networking. Additionally, we are not just passively passing news along, but are becoming more engaged with that news. Nearly 40 percent of those who
use the net “have contributed to the creation of news, commented about it, or disseminated it via postings on social media sites like Facebook or Twitter.” In the age of Networked News, we don’t just listen to the news—we are actively involved in discussing and distributing it.46

As a part of the Networked News, we are now no longer merely consumers, but participants in the fourth estate. While this presents a new opportunity to publicly question Junk Food News, misinformation, and spin, we also become complicit in spreading Junk Food News and News Abuse, becoming de facto, unpaid employees of the corporate media machine. Or as “Wolf Blitzer” in a Saturday Night Live parody of CNN’s Situation Room tells us, “Send us your updates, send us your photos . . . In other words, do our job for us.”47

**Junk Food News Feed**

The sad truth is that we no longer need corporate media channels to provide us with distracting gossip in the guise of news. On Facebook and Twitter, nowhere else is the banal minutiae of life more celebrated than on “news feeds,” such as “What sandwich should I eat for lunch?” Rather than follow celebrity gossip, rather than settling to only follow the trials and travails of Tiger Woods, we can now follow each other, becoming our own tabloids, creating Junk Food News out of our own lives, which we then post to our social network’s news feed.48 In this way, Networked News becomes an imitation—a simulacrum—of our network news, simply another avenue in which to immerse ourselves in gossip.49

That is not to say, however, that we have forgotten celebrities, as noted previously. After all, Americans talked about Tiger Woods’s car accident as much as they discussed Obama’s decision to begin pulling troops out of Afghanistan.50 Yet, interestingly, during the same period, Afghanistan received considerably more media coverage than Woods.51 In other words, the public actively amplified Woods’s tasty adventures—and through the power of social networking, had a megaphone by which to permeate our media atmosphere with his story. Networked News, in this way, is not only imitating, but actively distributing network news gossip. Perhaps, as the adage goes, we have become what we eat—after years of consuming Junk Food News, it is all we know how to serve.

**Say What You Really Meme**

Networked News, while composed of individuals, appears to have a mind
of its own. Just as a news story will dominate all the major corporate outlets, so do stories appear to take over news feeds. The Red Cross’s response to the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which raised $30 million through text messages, is a perfect example of this phenomenon.\textsuperscript{52} In the days following the earthquake, a message advising people to donate ten dollars by texting to a number spread not through ads, but virally through Facebook and other social networks, popping up on news feeds, and through e-mails and text messages. In early February, as the viral philanthropy for Haiti appeared to begin declining, a new virus caught on—that of “celebrity doppelganger week,” in which the fad of changing one’s profile picture to a celebrity’s photo quickly spread.\textsuperscript{53}

The viral nature of these trends, which spread so quickly through social networks, can be explained by famed scientist, controversial atheist, and “enthusiastic Darwinian” Richard Dawkins and his theory of the “meme,” or “unit of cultural transmission.” The Haiti text message philanthropy and celebrity doppelganger fads are both examples of memes, as are “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches.” A meme, in short, is any idea that can be passed from one person to another. “Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs,” Dawkins writes, explaining the concept via analogy, “so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.” Much more simply, Dawkins thinks that culture works like our genes—just as genes replicate themselves, so does culture, and so do ideas. Thus, “if a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. . . . If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain.” In other words, Dawkins believes, ideas have a sort of life of their own, using each of us to make copies of themselves in new people, who in turn do the same—spreading ideas virally.\textsuperscript{54} The strong ideas thrive and propagate, like a species of mice, and the weak ones adapt or die out. As Dan Fletcher writes in \textit{Time} of the celebrity doppelganger trend, “These are grass-roots memes that spread virally throughout the site, making them difficult to trace back to an origin with any certainty.”\textsuperscript{55} According to this theory, then, trends—memes—develop organically, as if from everywhere and nowhere, with no real author, no real creator but the crowd itself.

In Networked News, information spreads quickly from brain to brain regardless of substance or accuracy. As one can see, the memes of philanthropy and celebrity worship appear to spread at the same rate,
consuming social networks. Truth and falsehood spread at the same speed. A telling illustration of this phenomenon can be found in a study published in the American Journal of Infection Control. The authors studied the discussion of antibiotics on Twitter updates, finding that both accurate and inaccurate information on antibiotic use was being disseminated. And just as the public can spread misinformation on antibiotics through social media, so can they spread spin and create a hyperreality, the inability to distinguish between what is real and not. Networked News provides another potential forum to disseminate corporate or ideological spin, sensationalism, and misrepresentation—further propagating News Abuse.

The following News Abuse story themes show how corporate media coverage of otherwise serious issues are distorted and routinely propagandized, resulting in the censorship of ideas and the stunting of critical discourse that ultimately harm democracy.

**Obama is Hitler: Vile Goes Viral**

“At 11:09 Eastern Standard Time, Barack Obama is Hitler,” jokes late-night comedian Jon Stewart in a November 2008 segment of The Daily Show. Stewart had just shown a clip from Fox News in which Republican Representative Paul Broun equated President Barack Obama with the infamous Nazi leader Adolph Hitler. Stewart, along with Senior Absolutely Reasonable Hitler Comparison Analyst John Oliver, satirically relates the inept nature of such hyperbolic comparison. Broun’s sensationalist analogy, however, wasn’t a one-time gaffe, a simple slip of the tongue revealing the strange mindset of a single representative.

Rather, comparing Obama to Hitler has become a “standard right-wing trope,” not only among the conservative talkers—Rush Limbaugh, Michael Savage, and Glenn Beck—but in Networked News as well. In summer 2008, two videos comparing Obama to Hitler hit YouTube, garnering over a million hits over two years. Later that summer, at a town hall meeting for Democratic Representative Barney Frank, a woman made a comment drawing a similar comparison. The clip spread like wildfire across the news and the Internet. This woman was not a lone extremist, as the Obama=Hitler analogy has continued to surface at Tea Party protests. The image itself has been so viral and suggestive that the notion of Obama as Orwellian Big Brother even graces the cover of this book, calling attention to how propaganda works via imagery.

The Obama=Hitler meme appears not only surprisingly popular
among many of the politically disaffected on the right, but also exceptionally tenacious, as evidenced in a spring 2010 Facebook page with over a million members praying for Obama’s death.\textsuperscript{63} Around the same time former Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich released a book in which he claimed the current progressive agenda “represents as great a threat to America as Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union once did.” This statement was broadcast via corporate media both on the \textit{Today Show}\textsuperscript{64} and \textit{Fox News}.\textsuperscript{65}

The Obama=Hitler meme presents a case study of Networked News Abuse, in which the social networks work in collusion with the corporate media and its ideological interests to cultivate, maintain, and disseminate a sensationalist, paranoid hyperreality, which obfuscates any real discussion of Obama’s policies. More simply, network news and Networked News act as a hyperbolic echo chamber, in which extreme overstatement overshadows substantive democratic dialogue. (Obama has strangely been called everything from a fascist to a socialist and anywhere in between, further illustrating the absence of intellectual sobriety in the political media climate when discussing the president or his administration’s policies.)

In 1946, George Orwell observed, “Fascism has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies ‘something not desirable.’”\textsuperscript{66} And while literally meaningless except to express extreme distaste, the emotionally powerful term has persisted in political dialogue for well over a half-century. Indeed, in the more recent past the Hitler meme has not only been used by the right. During the 2004 presidential election, the liberal group MoveOn featured a user-generated anti-Bush ad online that compared Bush to Hitler. In response, Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie said on \textit{Fox News} that the ad was “the worst and most vile form of political hate speech.”\textsuperscript{67} a sentiment echoed by MSNBC’s Joe Scarborough, who also referred to the ad as “political hate speech.” Members at MoveOn apparently agreed that the comparison was egregious, and the organization subsequently distanced itself from the ad, which never officially aired.\textsuperscript{68}

With the election of America’s first black president, Barack Obama, “political hate speech” has resurfaced with a vengeance, this time cultivated in the corporate media by right-wing ideologues. In the last two years, numerous high-profile right-wing commentators have used Hitler or Nazism to refer to select Democrats and/or progressive policies or people, across a wide swath of corporate media outlets. Noah Lederman of the media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR)
observed the return of the Hitler analogy, this time in the corporate press in reference to Obama.59 Widely watched Fox News commentator Glenn Beck has been particularly glib in evoking the Hitler meme. Beck’s recurrent use of the Nazi analogy prompted Lewis Black, the permanently outraged comedic pundit, to diagnose Beck with a case of “Nazi Tourette’s” while on The Daily Show.70

While Beck may be the most vocal of the political epithet-hurling crowd, he did not create the Obama=Hitler meme. Rather, the genesis of the analogy originates with the conservative magazine National Review and three fellows at Stanford’s powerful right-wing think-tank Hoover Institution. Two years before Glenn Beck’s fascist tirades began, National Review writer and Hoover Institution fellow Thomas Sowell was one of the first to pose the Liberal–Nazi connection, writing, “Not since the days of the Hitler Youth have young people been subjected to more propaganda on more politically correct issues.”71 Yet, it wasn’t until a year later, in January 2008, that the idea took hold, with National Review editor, Hoover Institution media fellow,72 and Fox News contributor Jonah Goldberg’s book Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning (published by an imprint of the international multimedia conglomerate Bertelsmann AG).73 Ten days after the release of the book (which ultimately reached number one on the New York Times bestseller list), Goldberg was interviewed on MSNBC with Joe Scarborough, claiming “I’m not saying that today’s liberalism is the son of Nazism or the son of Italian fascism. I’m saying it’s sort of like the great-grandniece once removed. . . . They have some common DNA, some common themes, some family resemblances that come up.”74 Four years after the fact, Scarborough appeared to have forgotten that he himself once called any such comparison “political hate speech”; a week later, Scarborough even stated, “I love Jonah Goldberg.”

This “political hate speech” is now a part of mainstream political discourse surrounding Obama. In the following months, the meme took off as the right-wing crowd took on the comparison: Ann Coulter, Ben Stein, and Rush Limbaugh used the Nazi comparison after Goldberg, all in corporate media forums. Glenn Beck claimed that Goldberg’s book “began to open his eyes” (his Nazi Tourette’s syndrome was apparently a side effect). Further, according to FAIR’s Lederman, Goldberg had been on Beck’s show a whopping seventeen times.75 With millions of viewers and readers, Beck has a powerful Net-
worked News force, having garnered 900,000 Facebook friends and 240,000 followers on Twitter, who then redistribute Goldberg’s “political hate speech” across their own individual social networks (in much the same way as information about antibiotics spread on Twitter). In August 2009, wrapping up his “Liberal Fascism” blog on the National Review, Goldberg claimed he regretted the continued use of the term “fascist.” Goldberg lamented, “As I’ve said many times, one naive hope I had for my book was that it would remove the word ‘fascist’ from popular discourse, not expand its franchise. Alas, on that score the book is a complete failure.” Given the title of Goldberg’s book that seems an odd expectation.

Six months after Goldberg wrapped up press for his book, another Hoover Institution fellow was featured on the same corporate outlets repeating the same claims. Newt Gingrich, with a million more followers on Twitter than Beck, was keeping the comparison alive and well in the public mind with his book, To Save America: Stopping Obama’s Secular-Socialist Machine. Gingrich and Beck have their own Networked News, their own audiences, who, through social networks, have their own audiences, and so on. The Obama=Hitler meme passes from pundits through corporate outlets with their own online presence, through social networks, and into the political arena, becoming like a growing brand, accepted, if not agreed upon, and ultimately mainstreamed. So goes the hyperreality propaganda machine on the Obama=Hitler meme: News Abuse writ large.

The grassroots nature of the Networked News may be something of an illusion, with all the appearance of a grassroots movement but with none of the substance—an Astroturf hyperreality. In this example, we see a top-down model still operating within Networked News, where powerful ideological and corporate interests dictate not only the terms of the debate, but also the terms used in the debate. While the protestor using the Nazi analogy at Representative Barney Frank’s town hall meeting appeared to be part of a grassroots uprising of the people, she in fact borrowed terms and ways of thinking cultivated and broadcast in the right-wing, corporate media. It is doubtful this woman received marching orders from anyone, but rather took the ideas and language in the culture—the memes—to form and express her frustration. Because the clip of this protestor was replayed again and again on corporate news and YouTube, the Obama=Hitler meme spread even farther, to others who continue to use it with little thought of the com-
parison’s historical roots. Recycling through the news and through viral means across Networked News, the image of this protester—and her language—has become a template for others to utilize. Even if Gingrich and Beck did not give this protester direct orders, even if she never listened to either commentator, nor read Goldberg’s *Liberal Fascism*, nor heard of the Hoover Institution, she is nonetheless a participant in spreading their point of view, which then permeates the media environment. While we have focused on the media infrastructure that propagated this right-wing extremist spin, this case study illustrates the potential of any powerful ideological, religious, and/or corporate interests to hijack social networks, spread spin, and stymie authentic democratic debate. In this way, Networked News serves to further confuse genuine discourse, further amplifying paranoia and sensationalism over trust and substance.

**(B)LATANT (P)ROPAGANDA: FRAMING AS NEWS ABUSE AND CENSORSHIP**

*But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.*

—— GEORGE ORWELL, *Politics and the English Language*"}

Immediately following the disastrous malfunction of British Petroleum’s (BP) oil rig and the ensuing flood of oil pouring into the Gulf of Mexico, a battle began—not only to stop and capture the flow of oil, but as Paul Farhi of the *Washington Post* astutely observed, to publicly name the man-made disaster. Farhi notes, “The name of a disaster can be critical, both as a historic matter and the more immediate matters of image, public relations and legal liability.”

In other words, the labels affixed to the catastrophe would compete to influence the public’s perception, and as a result, impact the consequences for BP, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Obama administration (and as we write, this is an ongoing battle for the public mind). BP is the fourth-largest corporation in the world. For it to preserve its image, keep business flowing and lawsuits down, they would need the right name to stick in the public consciousness (like oil to pelicans), and thus, the right frame of mind (not like oil to pelicans). From day one, BP attempted to linguistically wriggle from responsibility by
calling the incident the “Gulf of Mexico Response.”80 President Obama, wanting to distance himself from responsibility and appear tough on corporate malfeasance, deemed it the “BP Oil Spill” (this despite, according to Politico, the president’s status as “the biggest recipient of BP cash”).81 By contrast, conservative radio commentator Rush Limbaugh used the disaster to pin blame on the president, calling it “Obama’s Katrina.”82 BP, Obama, and Limbaugh were doing their best to win the battle for the public mind, each vying to use their label to frame the event in the public consciousness. These parties were all trying to influence news of the event, not necessarily to get at the truth.

As Orwell observed in the epigraph above, the ways we speak and use language not only reflect upon our thinking, but can alter it—our language can help us see reality more clearly, or it can corrupt our thinking, obscuring reality. The words we use, and the language that media uses, matter—as the media have the power to conceal or reveal, to censor or shed light, to control thought or liberate it.

We cannot, as cognitive linguist George Lakoff observes, avoid frames that are “among the cognitive structure[s] we think with.”83 Whenever we hear any word, a frame of associated words and concepts jumps into our mind, whether we like it or not. Lakoff demonstrates this theory through the title of his New York Times bestseller, Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate. His point—even if he tells you not to think of one, your brain will still produce an image of the enormous mammal, with associated concepts and words: tusks, stampeding, republicans.84 When Limbaugh calls the ecological disaster in Louisiana “Obama’s Katrina,” and others in media echo the phrase, we can’t help but imagine the horrors of Katrina and link them to the devastation currently happening, and to Obama as well—even if we disagree with the connection. Similarly, when Obama uses “BP Oil Spill,” he does so purposely, to highlight the corporation’s responsibility, and, perhaps, to downplay the responsibility inherent in his administration’s response. When BP representatives leave their name out of the frame altogether, and even omit the fact that there was any sort of “spill,” they are trying to downplay their role and responsibility, and perhaps the idea that anything even happened at all. The phrases most repeated in the public sphere push us to think about the event in specific ways, which can serve to illuminate the reality of what happened, or to confuse it. Lakoff theorizes, “If we hear the same language over and over, we will think more and more in terms of the frames . . . activated by that language.” What-
ever phrase prevails will likely determine how the public interprets the event overall, and how they refer to it in person, and on Networked News. This influences the dominant narrative of the event and how it will be recorded in history (and possibly in oral testimony and eventually collective memory). Censorship and distortion can be preserved, instead of a narrative based on empirical facts.

Language engineers such as Lakoff and “Word Doctor” Frank Luntz, who encouraged Republicans to use the terms “death tax,” “tax relief,” “climate change,” and “war on terror,” actively shape the words which evoke the “right” frames and ideas. Luntz, a contributor to Fox News, is also a professional framer for major corporations: McDonald’s, NBC, Twentieth Century Fox, Boeing, Disney, General Motors, Lockheed Martin, and many others. “If words are weapons,” a Time magazine writer opines, “Frank Luntz is a samurai.” His most famous method, touted on his Web site and demonstrated in the PBS documentary The Persuaders, is Instant Response, in which he measures audience response to specific words or phrases to see how positively they react. The audience holds a dial in which they can instantly register positive and negative responses to parts of a speech, which Luntz carefully analyzes. He pitches the method for potential clients: “We can draft and analyze a wide array of language, so you will know down to the very word or phrase what resonates most. Whether it’s hours of speeches, reels of advertisements, or clip after clip of your spokesperson on national TV, we can test anything that you can tape. We even test language live as it is happening. That’s the ‘instant’ in instant response.”

Luntz ascertains the language that suits his clients’ interests, what language best “resonates” with the public, what best registers in their minds to create a positive impression. Then, based on this data, he encourages his clients to use the proposed words and phrases repetitively to invoke the most positive impression possible. This language, developed in a laboratory setting, is sent to the public through press releases and corporate spokespersons as frequently as possible, in an effort to create a positive frame. More simply, what Luntz is trying to do is create language memes, or ways of talking about a corporation, politician, policy, or event, which then become “normalized” through everyday conversation. Once the words of spin doctors become normalized and spread through network news and Networked News, the frames themselves become normalized. Note how this process, this memetic engineering, bears no resemblance to traditional journalistic standards of fact-based reporting or truth telling.
It is a very sophisticated form of propaganda. It amounts to censorship and manipulation of the public perception of reality. In short, it is thought control and deception peddling.

In this light, BP’s language engineers are currently winning the battle to minimize the scope of the disaster and their role in it (while losing the battle to actually stop the gushing oil). Although no major media outlets appear to be using BP’s official language, very few sources are using language that emphasizes the real ecological devastation caused, nor their corporate responsibility for it. Like Obama, the Associated Press, the Christian Science Monitor, and Democracy Now! have all used the phrase “BP Oil Spill,” which emphasizes BP’s responsibility. On the other hand, the phrase “spill” dramatically understates what is physically happening in the Gulf of Mexico: the oil is gushing from the seabed, not spilling, as BP’s own live video feed clearly shows. This seemingly slight difference in phrasing, repeated again and again, conceals what is in reality a volcanic, gushing flow of oil spewing into the Gulf of Mexico, to the tune of several millions of gallons a day (up to 4.2 million gallons a day by some estimates). This makes it the worst oil “spill” disaster in US history. Still, many of the references don’t even attach BP’s name to the oil gushing from their facility (leased from Transocean), hiding the long-term scope of their responsibility. Among the most frequently used phrases in the corporate media include “Gulf Oil Spill” or “Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill.” BP’s name, and responsibility, is absent in what are actually empirical misnomers—that is, propaganda.

Some progressive media and environmental groups, even when railing against BP, also employed misnomers, including the Huffington Post, the Socialist Equality Party, and Earth First. Although the Sierra Club called it the “BP Oil Disaster” in the Washington Post, they used the innocuous term “Gulf Oil Spill” on their own Web site. Similarly, OnEarth magazine, an outgrowth of the Natural Resources Defense Council, has used the term “BP Oil Disaster,” but also frequently uses “Gulf Coast Oil Spill.” This innocuous way of speaking about the gusher in the Gulf is seeping into our social networks as well. A Facebook group that is supported by the Mississippi Press, the Times-Picayune, and other newspapers in the Gulf region calls itself “Save the Gulf,” leaving BP out of the title entirely. Thus, as these groups try to critique BP and encourage the enraged public to take action, by using BP’s neutered language they serve to reinforce BP’s spin. “It doesn’t matter if you are negating words or questioning them,” Lakoff writes, “the same
frames . . . will be activated and hence strengthened.”99 The more the critics, the media, and each member of Networked News uses the corporate language, which mitigates BP’s responsibility and minimizes the disaster, the more we unwittingly become BP’s proxy public relations (PR) agents.

Phrases like the “Gulf Oil Spill” and “Obama=Hitler” are real, though diluted forms of what George Orwell called “Newspeak”, from the archetypal dystopia of 1984. The language engineers of the Party (Ingsoc, or English Socialism) created Newspeak, the official language of the totalitarian nation Oceania, “not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible.” By constructing language, the Party could control thought; they could privilege frames that reinforced their ideology. And Newspeak, of course, was designed as a mechanism of control, not to “extend but to diminish the range of thought.”100 Corporate media and public relations firms operate in much the same way by employing tactics that yield News Abuse.

In Orwell’s nightmare world of 1984, language is an instrument to censor, suppress, and corrupt thought. Clearly, powerful interests—like BP, owners of the corporate media, or political parties—are best served by Newspeak, by a language, a way of speaking that bolsters their image at the expense of reality, and thus at the expense of We the People. BP recently spent $50 million on a PR campaign designed to shape the way the public thinks and speaks about their company.101 Part of BP’s campaign included the purchasing of oil spill–related search terms on Google, which ensured more people were directed in Web searches about the Gulf incident to BP’s pages, BP’s Newspeak language, and BP’s frames.102

If reporters, critics, and citizens choose to use language unreflectively rather than thoughtfully, we may all succumb to the easiest language, the language we see the most, the language that has the most money behind it, that appears across the corporate media, and that now appears across our social media. The result is that we use the most powerful and prevalent words or frames in the “meme pool,” rather than those that best express reality. Without thinking about the words we use and the frames we construct, we unwittingly promote spin, giving greater currency, legitimacy, and normalcy to visions of the world that may be entirely hyperreal.

Fortunately, unlike in Orwell’s Oceania, we can still choose our own words, and construct our own public frames. We must do so in an effort to
actualize a society not only capable of imagining a free press, free speech, and protection of the commons, but of achieving these ideals as well.

**SHATTERING THE ILLUSIONS: WHAT WE CAN DO TO COMBAT JUNK FOOD NEWS AND NEWS ABUSE**

*You are what you Tweet.*
—David Mathison, author of Be the Media

As much as what has been outlined here clearly fits into Orwellian constructs of language and thought control, or outright propaganda and distraction, it is indeed important that we return to the notion put forth by Neil Postman at the outset proposing that Aldous Huxley prevails over Orwell as an overall frame for the American mindset. It is one thing to be duped, deceived, mislead, lied to, manipulated, and cajoled, but it is quite another that a people allow this continued pattern to prevail (dare we suggest some among us may enjoy living in the dark), especially when we now have at our fingertips the knowledge and power to dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools. Postman aptly noted, “[M]ost of our daily news is inert, consisting of information that gives us something to talk about but cannot lead to any meaningful action.”

We can demand more than that. We can change how we get our information and not only insist upon truthful reporting, but help to create it and support it where it already exists.

We can use the Internet, Facebook, and Twitter to further social justice, to inform each other about truthful news items that affect all of our communities, and to proactively engage in democratic participatory arenas, or we can be part of the News Abuse cycle. We can deny PR spin and demand factual reporting and just civil proceedings. We can also proclaim that Hitler is not among us in the public arena. It’s a choice. Postman remarked that, “Technology always has unforeseen consequences, and it is not always clear, at the beginning, who or what will win, and who or what will lose.” In other words, it is not too late.

We can be the media, we can build citizen journalism to serve the public good, we can utilize our public educational system of colleges and universities and libraries to research and produce accurate news. We can influence the direction we take as a democratic society, and refuse to be lead by rogues of one political stripe preying upon our commons
or wolves in sheep’s clothing of another stripe peddling faux elixirs like “hope and change.” We have to be the change, we cannot rely on elites from political parties or corporate boardrooms to give us hope. We are hope and we can manifest our ideals in a democratic culture that we create, with our own media, our own frames—not BP’s, not CNN’s or Fox’s, not Bush’s or Obama’s, or Beck’s: the People’s.

One thing that is certain: Americans cannot rely on the corporate media to report the truth about the most crucial matters at hand. In his recent book, The Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle, Chris Hedges clearly lays out the case against the televised corporate news media, with their fusion of Junk Food News and News Abuse:

Television journalism is largely a farce. Celebrity reporters, masquerading as journalists, who make millions a year give a platform to the powerful and the famous so they can spin, equivocate, and lie. Sitting in a studio, putting on makeup, and chatting with Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, or Lawrence Summers has little to do with journalism. If you are a true journalist, you should start to worry if you make $5 million a year. No journalist has a comfortable, cozy relationship with the powerful. No journalist believes that serving the powerful is a primary part of his or her calling. Those in power fear and dislike journalists—and they should.\[^{108}\]

Hedges expands, “We are cleverly entertained during our descent. We have our own version of ancient Rome’s bread and circuses with our ubiquitous and elaborate spectacles, sporting events, celebrity gossip and television reality shows.”\[^{109}\] In other words, as Huxley implied, we will come to enjoy our servitude, and in fact rely upon it, mistaking the stability of a consistent and relative intellectual and democratic decline for progress.

Make no mistake: the mendacity of paid corporate media shills that masquerade as journalists and propagate Junk Food News and News Abuse stories night and day, week in and week out, around the clock, know no bounds and will not stop. They cannot be reformed. It is their job, their role in the technocratic, mass media, privatized, for profit, corporate propaganda machine. It is our job, our role, as a free people, as
responsible individuals acting in concert, and as citizens, to safeguard and realize a truly independent and free press. Such a press is the life’s blood of republican government. Our future depends upon it.

MICKEY HUFF is the director of Project Censored, an associate professor of history at Diablo Valley College, and a member of the board of directors at the Media Freedom Foundation. He has co-edited and coauthored two volumes of Censored yearbooks with Dr. Peter Phillips.

FRANCES A. CAPELL is a senior creative writing major at San Francisco State University, a Project Censored intern, and the student representative on the board of the Media Freedom Foundation. She coauthored “Infotainment Society: Junk Food News and News Abuse for 2008–2009” with Mickey Huff in Censored 2010.

ADAM BESSIE is an assistant professor of English at Diablo Valley College, where he teaches composition, reading, and critical thinking. His scholarship on metaphor and the mind is being used by Robert Wallerstein, MD, former president of the International Psynchronalitical Association, in an upcoming major journal article. He regularly publishes essays on language, education, and culture on diverse, independent media Web sites, including the Daily Censored and OpEd News.

Special thanks to NOLAN HIGDON, Project Censored intern, for research assistance and formatting of this article, and to MEG HUFF, for editing and inspiration.

Notes
2. For more information about Project Censored see our Web site at www.projectcensored.org; and for more of an overview and background about what the Project has done over the years, see Peter Phillips, Charlene Jones, Sandy Murphy, Carl Jensen, and Project Censored, “Thirty Years of Censored News” in Censored 2007, eds. Peter Phillips and Project Censored (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2006), 159–69 (these are remarks on the founding and history of the Project by Dr. Carl Jensen); and see Peter Phillips and Mickey Huff, “Analysis of Project Censored: Are We a Left-Leaning, Conspiracy-Oriented Organization?” in Censored 2010, eds. Peter Phillips, Mickey Huff, and Project Censored (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009), 261–90.
3. Ben Bagdikian, The Media Monopoly (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983). The work has now gone through seven editions and illustrates the ongoing impact of conglomerates in media ownership; whereas in the US there used to be over fifty corporations in mass media ownership, today there are fewer than ten major players. For a primer on problems of mass media and propaganda issues in the US, see Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s classic work Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media (New York: Pantheon, 1988).
The late New York University media scholar Neil Postman once said about America, “We are the best entertained least informed society in the world.” Since the mid-1980s, Project Censored has examined this phenomenon in the culture of the 24/7 television news cycle. Looking beyond what the corporate news media uncover or ignore, Project Censored surveys what they do spend precious airtime and column inches on while not covering the top censored stories or others in the public interest. Which types of news stories have been found consistently by such surveys in this so-called information age? “Junk Food News,” said Project Censored founder Dr. Carl Jensen. “It’s like a Twinkie, not very nourishing for the consumer.” This is how Jensen described it back in 1984 when he first began looking at how tabloid sensationalism had inundated the nightly news with the “Where’s the Beef” campaign. Jensen still considers Junk Food News a major problem in journalism and corporate media, particularly on today’s cable and television news.

While the News Abuse category may be confusing in relation to Junk Food News, one distinction is that News Abuse stories are about serious issues or are genuinely newsworthy items. However, they are misrepresented in the corporate press, and have been manipulated, trivialized, distorted, personalized, or, more aptly, tabloidized. News Abuse stories are transformed from potentially newsworthy items into far more titilating yet irrelevant distractions as a result.

5. Ibid.
6. Hyperreality is a term often associated with the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, among others. It refers to a condition in which one cannot distinguish between what is real and what is not and is often linked causally to a media-saturated culture. A common example given for this is Disneyland. See Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations,” in Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166–84; and John Tiffin and Nobuyoshi Terashima, eds., Hyperreality: Paradigm For The Third Millennium (New York: Routledge, 2001). Historian Daniel Boorstin also addressed this issue and associated it with the rise of advertising in The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (originally published 1961). Also, for more on the application of the term hyperreality in media studies see Andrew Hobbs and Peter Phillips, “The Hyperreality of a Failing Corporate Media System,” in Censored 2010, 251–59 (also online at http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/the-hyperreality-of-a-failing-corporate-media-system).
9. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
24. Rawlinson and Hunt, “Jackson Dies, Almost Takes Internet with Him.”
25. Rosenstiel, Hitlin, and Khan, “Media Swing from Protests in Iran to the Passing of the King of Pop.”
26. Ibid.
29. Rosenstiel, Hitlin, and Khan, “Media Swing from Protests in Iran to the Passing of the King of Pop.”
35. Linkins, “Media’s Balloon Boy Coverage Filled With More Hot Air Than Actual Balloon.”


38. Linkins, “Media’s Balloon Boy Coverage Filled With More Hot Air Than Actual Balloon.”


Stories the corporate media could have been covering during Governor Sanford scandal, from June 24 on: Kate Devlin, “Chemicals In Shampoos and Toys ‘Could Lead to Low Birth Weight,’” The Telegraph, June 25, 2009, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/health-
news/5624161/Chemicals-in-shampoos-and-toys-could-lead-to-low-birth-weight.html; and
Elizabeth Bluemink, “Court Allows Gold Mine To Dump Waste In Lake,” Anchorage Daily
22/840031/court-allow-gold-mine-to-dump.html.

Stories the corporate media could have given more attention to after the death of
Michael Jackson, from June 25 on: Sharon Cohen, “Did Toxic Chemical in Iraq Sicken
2009/06/28; and Dafna Linzer and Peter Finn, “White House Is Drafting Executive
Order to Allow Indefinite Detention; Move Would Bypass Congress,” Pro Publica, June
allow-indefinite-detention-626.

Stories the corporate media could have been covering during the Balloon Boy inci-
dent, from October 15 on: Graham Bowley, “Bailout Helps Fuel a New Era of Wall Street
Wealth,” Common Dreams, October 17, 2009, http://www.commondreams.org/ head-
line/2009/10/17-0; Thalif Deen, “US Berated for Shielding Israel on Gaza Killings,”
and Ben Webster, “The Arctic Will Be Ice-Free in Summer within 20 Years, Research
Says,” Times (London), October 15, 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/sci-
cence/earth-environment/article6875260.ece.

Stories the corporate media could have been covering during the Salahi Gate
Crashers incident, from November 30 on: Sue Sturgis, “The Campaign Cash Behind
the Afghanistan Escalation,” Facing South, December 1, 2009, http://www.southern-
studies.org/2009/12/the-campaign-cash-behind-the-afghanistan-escalation.html; Yara
Bayoumy, “UN: Rape in Afghanistan a Human Rights Problem of ‘Profound Proport-
2009/11/30-8; Ryan Grim, “Senate Bill Contains A Gift For Big Banks,” Huffington
contains-a-gi_n_373962.html; Richard Norton-Taylor, “Iraq Inquiry: Blair Told Bush
He Was Willing To Join, 11 Months Before War,” Guardian, November 30, 2009,

46. Kristen Purcell, et al., “Understanding the Participatory News Consumer: How Inter-
net and Cell Phone Uses Have Turned News into a Social Experience,” Pew Research

132877/saturday-night-live-cnn-reports.

48. Thanks to Allison Levitsky from Adam Bessie’s English 122 course at Diablo Valley
College for the insightful phrase “tabloids of ourselves.”

49. Jean Baudrillard’s groundbreaking definition of the term “simulacrum” essentially
means a “simulation.” He argues that today’s reality is mass-produced, or simulated,
by powerful social forces. “It is the map,” Baudrillard writes, “that precedes the terri-
tory.” In other words, we use the map to shape the territory, not just to represent it. The
map does not depict what exists, but creates what exists. An example might be a pre-
planned suburb, in which the developers attempt to recreate a “rustic landscape,” thus
shaping the actual landscape into their vision. The residents, then, are living in a sim-
ulation of a rustic landscape, in the vision created by what developers thought rustic
should look like. The simulation becomes reality. In much the same way, what we
argue here is that corporate news has essentially provided a map, a blueprint, for how
we report news on our on social networks. Celebrity culture, which we are awash in,
becomes the model—the map—on which we create our own media culture. Thus,
our social networks become a photocopy, a simulation, of what we see on network
news. In our own lives, we often mime what we see in the major media. For more
detail on the concept of "simulacrum," see Baudrillard, "The Procession of Simu-
(New York: Norton, 2001). 1729–1741. Also, the excerpt from this book on which our
theory is built is available online at http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Bau-
drillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html.

50. *Pew Research Center Publications*, “Public Follows War, Talks Tiger,” December 10,
salalah.

51. Jurkowitz, “Afghanistan Dominates While Two Scandals Fascinate.”

changing_philan.html.

53. Andrew Heining, “Facebook Celebrity Doppelganger Week: What You Need to Know,”
zons/2010/0202/Facebook-Celebrity-Doppelganger-Week-What-you-need-to-know.

which coined the term “meme,” and the field of memetics, “Memes: The New Repli-

55. Dan Fletcher, “Facebook’s Doppelganger Week is Viral Groupthink,” *Time*, February 5,
2010, http://www.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,1960438,00.html#ixzzonMDqtCPB.

Information Through Social Networks: Twitter and Antibiotics,” *American Journal of
Infection Control* 38, no. 3, http://download.journals.elsevierhealth.com/pdfs/jour-
nals/0196-6553/PIIS0196655310000349.pdf.

57. For a more thorough discussion of hyperreality, see Andrew Hobbs and Peter Phillips,
“The Hyperreality of a Failing Corporate Media System,” in *Censored 2010*, 251-259;
also see endnote numbers 6 and 46 of this article, specifically regarding Jean Bau-
drillard.


http://www.opednews.com/articles/Obama-is-Hitler-WTF-by-Adam-Bessie-081130-
755.html.

60. Noah Lederman, “Playing the Nazi Card: Comparing Obama to Hitler Becomes a Stan-
ard Right-Wing Trope,” *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR)*, March 2010,
http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4022. It should also be noted that in the Bush
years, the corporate media criticized Hitler comparisons made by the left, while under
Obama they treat them as potentially serious critiques from the right.

com/watch?v=eS2rJU-pdUS&feature=related. It is unclear if the poster is the author
of the video, or if this is the original date it hit *YouTube*. Such is the nature of social net-
working—it is not known at the time of writing who produced this video nor who
funded it.

62. Lederman, “Playing the Nazi Card.”

63. Bianca Bosker, “Facebook Group ‘Praying’ For President Obama’s Death Passes One
.com/2010/04/28/facebook-group-praying-for-obama-fo_n_555227.html.
69. Lederman, “Playing the Nazi Card.”
75. Lederman, “Playing the Nazi Card.”
77. See @newtgingrich, Newt Gingrich’s Twitter account, at http://twitter.com/Newt-Gingrich. Readers can search public figures, Twitter followers, and who they follow by opening a Twitter account at http://twitter.com.
78. Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.”
80. Ibid.
89. *Media Matters*, “Media absurdly claim oil spill is ‘Obama’s Katrina.’”
92. Mark Guarino, “Gulf Oil Spill: ‘Top Kill’ Could Be Last Best Chance To Stop Leak,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 2010, http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/2010/0519/Gulf-oil-spill-top-kill-could-be-last-best-chance-to-stop-leak. Says Guarino, “Despite BP and Coast Guard estimates that about 210,000 gallons, or 5,000 barrels, of oil are escaping, independent sources are reporting that number is greatly conservative, saying the real discharge is estimated between 3.9 million to 4.2 million gallons a day.” Also reported by Amy Goodman, “Government Doubles Oil Spill Size Estimate,” *Democracy Now!*, June 11, 2010, http://www.democracynow.org/2010/6/11/headlines. Another common media obfuscation involves switching oil amounts from barrels to gallons, given the fact that many people do not immediately realize that there are 42 gallons in a barrel. So, saying there are 4.2 million gallons gushing from the Gulf a day sounds worse than saying there are 100,000 barrels leaking or spilling, even though it is basically the same amount. The use of different terms with shifting measurements acts to shape perception, not reality.
95. *Earth First!*, “Gulf Oil Spill Hits Day 40 With No End In Sight,” May 29, 2010, news section, http://www.enn.com/wildlife/article/41375/print. *Earth First!* linked to the *Environmental News Network* who in turn linked to a *Reuters* article. Additionally, even the *Revolution* newspaper (of the Revolutionary Communist Party) continued to use terms describing the BP-induced disaster without invoking the company’s name in their headlines, despite being contacted by Mickey Huff (coauthor of this chapter, and also coauthor of a piece on the oil spill) explaining to them how they were furthering the corporate line on the issue. Given the anticapitalist nature of the organization, it illustrates how these memes or frames in the corporate media infiltrate social networks and potentially corrupt language to such an extent that groups adopt language that is contrary to their own ideological principles (*Revolution’s* Facebook updates also often left BP out of the headlines and even adopted the term “spill” which does not empirically describe what is happening in the Gulf as a result of BP’s failures). As of June 15, 2010, *Revolution’s* Web site, http://www.rwor.org, had for the most part left BP out of any headline on the issue that they called the “oil catastrophe.”
98. “Save the Gulf of Mexico,” Facebook, http://www.facebook.com/SaveTheGulfOfMexico?ref=ts. This is a Facebook group with about 80,000 people that “like it” as of June 8, 2010. That said, in terms of framing, we also found more popular, explicitly anti-BP Facebook pages such as “Stop the Oil Spill by Stuffing BP Executives Into the Leak,” with over 250,000 fans as of the same date, http://www.facebook.com/stoptheoilspill?ref=ts, and another called “Boycott BP” with over 620,000 fans as of June 15, 2010, http://www.facebook.com/?ref=logo#!/pages/Boycott-BP/1191011198107726?ref=ts. Being aware of different frames is the key point.


101. Hibah Yousuf, “BP Buys Google, Yahoo Oil Spill Search Terms,” *CNN Money*, June 7, 2010, http://money.cnn.com/2010/06/07/news/companies/BP_search_terms/index.htm. Here, BP is even attempting to skirt public research. It should be noted that other corporate news outlets also reported on this phenomenon, further illustrating that the medium is not operating completely outside free press standards of journalism, but it is so often complicit in Junk Food News and News Abuse that extreme vigilance is required, ultimately making corporate media an untrustworthy and inconsistent source of accurate information.

102. David Mathison, *Be the Media* (Tiburon, CA: natural E creative Group, LLC, 2009); see http://bethemedia.com. For more about Mathison, see chapter fourteen of this volume.

103. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 68. On page 68–69, Postman goes on to say this phenomenon has come about since the invention of the telegraph. He stated, “By generating an abundance of irrelevant information, it dramatically altered what may be called the ‘information ratio.’” The creation of later communications technologies exacerbated this and “made the relationship between information and action both abstract and remote.” Postman concluded, “for the first time in human history, people were faced with the problem of information glut, which means that simultaneously they were faced with the problem of a diminished social and political potency. . . . We have here a great loop of impotence: the news elicits from you a variety of opinions about which you can do nothing except to offer them as more news, about which you can do nothing.” Bear in mind Postman was writing all this before the Internet. That is both a scary thought as well as a promising one depending upon if we choose to use new technology proactively rather than be used by it passively.


106. See chapter eleven of this volume for more on this issue.
