We are awash in electronic hallucinations. The worse it gets, the more we retreat into those hallucinations.
Dying cultures always sever themselves from reality, because reality becomes so difficult to face, and we’re no exception to that.
—Chris Hedges, interview with MediaRoots.org

INTRODUCTION: THE EVER-BLURRING LINES OF NEWS AND ENTERTAINMENT . . . THAT’S INFOTAINMENT!

Since Project Censored founder Dr. Carl Jensen coined the term “Junk Food News” in 1983 in an interview with Penthouse magazine, many serious studies on the “tabloidization” of news in the US have been conducted. From scholars such as Neil Postman and Mark Crispin Miller to journalists and commentators like Barbara Ehrenreich and Chris Hedges, the problem of infotainment—the blurring of lines of entertainment and information while favoring the trivial and inane over the substantive and germane—has been deconstructed, analyzed, and accordingly derided by free press proponents. Prescriptions for rectifying these infectious and distracting tendencies have been put forth and will be reiterated throughout this chapter. Despite this, Junk Food News (and its younger sibling, News Abuse—the framing or distortion of information for propagandistic purposes) have essentially taken over much of the televised news media and a substantial portion of the print press as well, arguably due to the massive extent of commercial control over major media institutions by corporations.
At Project Censored, we write about the growing problem of Junk Food News in our publication every year, and we do so again this year, though not with pleasure. The pejorative subtitle of this chapter alludes to a growing “when are we in America going to get it?” level of frustration. Our media landscape is addled with Junk Food News, what Jensen called akin to “Twinkies for the brain.” This is hardly a secret. But what are we going to do about it? Comedy Central’s Jon Stewart and other late-night television court jesters get in on the act of criticizing and lampooning the failures of the US news media on a regular basis. In fact, it is a key component of many of these nightly “infotainment” programs (especially given that these shows are the most watched “news” sources by those under twenty-five in the US). Is it supposed to be funny that our information systems are so dysfunctional? Perhaps we are truly severed from reality in a nervous last gasp response given the severity of the situation, “awash in electronic hallucinations,” as Chris Hedges believes.¹

As a study from the Pew Research Center for People and the Press revealed a few years ago, many are turning to these comedy shows for information because they are not only entertaining, but are often factually correct, at least insofar as what they air. Nonetheless, viewers should remember that the purpose of this type of late-night programming is humor, not news reporting. However, that so many people are tuning away from traditional news broadcasts is also an indicator of increasing lack of public trust in the Fourth Estate.² Regardless, we are in dire straits, as pointed out by media scholars Robert W. McChesney and John Nichols in their recent book, *The Death and Life of American Journalism*. The authors rightly point out, “Our nation faces the absurd and untenable prospect of attempting what James Madison characterized as impossible: to be a self governing constitutional republic without a functioning news media.”³ We should consider ourselves forewarned, for as our press is reduced to parody, so is democracy itself.

Junk Food News has become such a phenomenon, one that poses a serious threat to the democratic function of the Fourth Estate, that entire books have been devoted to the topic, including journalist Tom Fenton’s *Junk News: The Failure of the Media in the 21st Century*, published in 2009. Again, this illustrates the increased attention the
problem is receiving, but the Junk keeps coming. Project Censored has been covering this troublesome trend ever since some news editors took umbrage at Carl Jensen’s critiques of the failures of the mainstream press dating back to 1976. They claimed his cries of censorship were too harsh, that they had to use news judgment when deciding what was reported and what was not.

Jensen thought that might be a fair response. So, by the early 1980s, he focused more on what the media were covering, not just what they weren’t. What he discovered was vindicating, though sad, for his initial views that the news media were in fact systematically failing to report important stories to the public turned out to be true in more ways than he had originally thought, and the Junk Food News analysis by Project Censored was born.

In *Censored 1994*, Jensen wrote:

> Our annual Junk Food News effort evolved from criticism by news editors and directors that the real issue isn’t censorship, but rather a difference of opinion as to what information is important to publish or broadcast. Editors point out that there is a finite amount of time and space for news delivery—about 23 minutes for a half-hour network television evening news program—and that it’s their responsibility to determine which stories are most critical for the public to know.

> This appeared to be legitimate criticism, so I decided to review the stories that editors and news directors consider to be most important and worthy enough to fill their valuable news time and space. The critics said I wasn’t exploring media censorship but rather was just another frustrated academic criticizing editorial news judgment. In the course of this research project, I haven’t found an abundance of hard-hitting investigative journalism. Quite the contrary. Indeed, what has become evident is the journalistic phenomenon I call Junk Food News, which in essence represents the flip side of the ‘Best Censored Stories.’

Jensen laid out several major categories of Junk Food News that continue to be useful to this day, as demonstrated by cursory yet cur-
rent examples from this past year, some of which will be expanded upon in this chapter:

- **Brand Name News:** Celebrity branding, where the name says it all, as in Brangelina, Donald Trump, Charlie Sheen, Sarah Palin and her family’s reality show, the anniversary of Michael Jackson’s death; anything with these people is somehow “news”

- **Sex News:** Weiner gate, John Edwards’s affair and its aftermath, Tiger Woods (from last year’s list of Junk Food News), Hollywood trysts and breakups—there is never a shortage in this category

- **Yo-Yo News:** Economy is up or down, employment rates are up or down, the stock market is up and down, various candidates may or may not run for president (Trump, Palin, Gingrich), which candidate raised the most money last week, who is ahead in the horse race polls in election years

- **Crazed News:** The craze or fad of the day, the Birthers, the Tea Partiers, Angry Townhall meeting crashers, Rapture fever and the End of Days for 2012, the Angry Birds game, and other commercial fads, fashion styles, and so on

- **Showbiz News:** Charlie Sheen’s goddesses, Sheen’s Tiger Blood meltdown, Lindsay Lohan’s ongoing exploits, Lady Gaga’s shocking antics, Donald Trump’s show, Sarah Palin’s daughter on *Dancing with the Stars*, the final season of (insert show here)

- **Sports News:** It isn’t just Super Bowls, March Madness, and stats; it’s also about life on and off the field, with Tiger Woods (on and off the course), Bret Farve’s sexy phone messages, Big Ben’s marriage after scandal, and the buildup to big championship events that oft do not really impact the lives of many people

- **Political News:** Endless candidate campaign promises, horse race polls, fundraisers and photo ops, plus the cult of
personality, (e.g. Trump, Palin, or America’s political dynasties from the Kennedys to the Bushes to the Clintons)

Over fifteen years after Jensen compiled these Junk Food News categories, they sadly not only continue, but also intertwine: notice how there is significant overlap between the recent examples—political news overlaps with sex news, crazed news, brand name news, and so on. The Junk Food News matrix has grown out of control, with entertainment thriving and substantive news withering. And when real news is covered in the mass media, it is covered with a concerning lack of substance called News Abuse, the phenomenon where a story may have a newsworthy component to it, but the coverage of it veers off into the trivial and inconsequential, which includes framing and omission as a major part of media propaganda.

With the advent of round-the-clock news coverage of daily world events, the time to cover important stories has maxed out, but coverage has in fact dropped precipitously in terms of corporate media coverage of relevant stories. Several media scholars and journalists, along with Project Censored, have argued that the news has become more Junk-addled and Abused than ever. In 1994, Jensen said, “We’re suffering from news inflation—there seems to be more of it than ever before—and it isn’t worth as much as it used to be.” Sadly, that seems even truer today than ever. There is almost an inverse correlation between media time on the 24/7 news outlets and actual news coverage as much of the “news” is now more opinion journalism, News Abuse, or just Junk Food News, and much of it is simply repeated around the clock. Further, it is not just that there is a plethora of Junk Food News across the airwaves and cyber optic cables, it is that this steady diet of trash crowds out what independent journalists are covering (i.e. what’s really going on in the world yet is not widely broadcast to the public).

Our news cycle has become not unlike a 7-11: open for business 24/7, aisles overflowing with empty calories. Here are some of the lowlights of this past year’s Junk Food News alongside what the corporate media could have been serving viewers if they were exercising sound news judgment and providing the public with information necessary for a healthy democracy.
I. JUNK FOOD NEWS FROM 2010–2011:
SHEEN TRUMPS PALIN: DON’T TOUCH
MY JUNK FOOD NEWS!

*If you touch my junk . . . I’ll have you arrested.*
—John Tyner, US citizen protesting TSA screening techniques
at a San Diego, CA airport, which became a viral news
story that dominated the corporate media

Given that Junk Food News is now more ubiquitous than ever, we at
Project Censored no longer rank “The Top Ten Junk Food Stories of the
Year.” The ranking, while amusing, is no longer a way to mark how far
off course corporate news media have gone. Instead, we highlight some
of the more egregious examples, often in thematic fashion and sometimes
tongue-in-cheek, to show our contempt for those in corporate media
that still claim censorship doesn’t happen and rather that news judg-
ment is what determines coverage. Given the proliferation of Junk Food
News and the sheer escalation of its coverage, it is clear that news judg-
ment has gone horribly awry. Below are some of the past year’s top
stories Americans couldn’t ignore if they tried, despite their complete
inanity, and what corporate media could have been covering instead.

America’s severance from reality is abetted by the corporate media’s
inundation of sensationalized trivialities, which grossly distort the con-
text and relevance of many issues in the mainstream political
discourse. Here are a few significant examples from the past year that
could be summed up under the headline “Vicarious Anger Misman-
agement: Insane is the New Fame.”

**Of Tiger Blood and Birthers**

During the first four days of the corporate media’s fanatical coverage
of actor Charlie Sheen’s drug-addled, tiger-blooded neurosis, four
more US soldiers were killed in combat in Afghanistan. Yet, CNN only
took notice after a Facebook campaign initiated by a fellow soldier
got viral, which pitted the coverage of fallen heroes against the
celebrity addict. The campaign galvanized tens of thousands of people
to write the following on their Facebook pages:
Charlie Sheen is all over the news because he’s a celebrity drug addict, while Andrew Wilfahrt, 31; Brian Tabada, 21; Rudolph Hizon, 22; and Chauncy Mays, 25, are soldiers who gave their lives this week with no media mention. Please honor them by posting this as your status update.

In addition to nonstop updates about Charlie Sheen’s “winning” streak, ABC’s 20/20\(^8\) and CNN’s Piers Morgan\(^9\) cleared hour-long time slots for Sheen to rant about his wild escapades and delusions of grandeur. Good Morning America also dedicated an entire show to broadcast live from Sheen’s Hollywood home for a revelation not to be missed: his urine drug test results. MSNBC ran and reran a “documentary” of Sheen over several weekends.\(^10\)

Showbiz veteran Charlie Sheen and his gaggle of euphemisms became quintessential brand name news, virally marketed by frothing media outlets worldwide. The public platform given to his breakdown resulted in his gaining a record-breaking 1 million Twitter followers in just one day, a feat which begat another onslaught of corporate news coverage.\(^11\)

Meanwhile, less than two weeks later, the devastating earthquake and nuclear disaster in Fukushima caused a brief switch in coverage to focus on the tragedy. This was not to last long, though: once Donald Trump, billionaire real estate mogul and reality TV star, announced his presidential run and reignited the distracting “Birther” controversy about President Barack Obama’s birth certificate, the corporate media unquestioningly followed suit, propelling the non-issue to the forefront of political discourse.\(^12\) There were few discussions about the global implications of Fukushima’s nuclear meltdown and the importance of pursuing sustainable energy alternatives. Instead of focusing on the dangers of the twenty-three nuclear reactors in the US designed almost identically to those in Fukushima,\(^13\) the corporate media irresponsibly dwelled on Trump’s crazed news “Birther” claims. Although the Fukushima crisis still loomed heavily, the media’s focus shifted again, along with the American public’s attention span.

As Charlie Sheen’s downward spiral and Trump’s “Birther” campaign reigned supreme in the corporate press, the US government continued its controversial bombing campaign against Libya unabated,\(^14\) potentially in
violation of international law—something the nation’s media should likely address instead of the latest Sheen or Trump distractions. The obsession over such superficialities dilutes rational debate on American foreign policy, like the feasibility of spending forty million dollars a month in Libya when our country is already racked with debt, or the sheer contradiction of bombing other countries for “humanitarian” reasons.

**Palin Saturation Bomb**

When the popular reality television show “Dancing With the Stars” approached its season finale, the airwaves became saturated with the devastating news that Bristol Palin’s winning streak on the show might have been rigged by Tea Party enthusiasts. This meaningless topic wasn’t just hot on *Entertainment Tonight* or TMZ, but was extensively covered in *Time*, *CNN*, *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, and a slew of other corporate media outlets, which seemed far more engrossed in the potential fraud than in the documented national election irregularities of the past decade. The cultural fixation on the Palin family’s crazy antics—from Sarah Palin’s misquotes of important facts of American history to Bristol’s plastic surgery and pregnancy out of wedlock—props up the notion in the mainstream that the more insane one acts, the more fame one is awarded.

Thanks to the corporate media’s crazed and yo-yo “news” coverage of everything Palin, she has turned into one of the most titillating household showbiz names in the US despite her potentially making a mockery of the political process in her quest for celebrity. Yet, her role in the establishment is an enigma—one day she’s a politician, the next she’s starring in a reality TV-show about her “down home” Alaskan lifestyle. The lines are blurred by the corporate news media, and the public becomes slack-jawed and Palinized as a result of this incessant matrix of Junk Food News and News Abuse.

The week prior to the earth-shattering revelation that Bristol Palin might not be worthy of the “Dancing with the Stars” trophy, two important stories cycled through the corporate media with very little discussion about their political and societal repercussions. Robert Mueller, Director of the FBI, met with Google and Facebook to coordinate an intensified push to expand online government wiretapping.
These extensions of online surveillance could effectively create a “chilling effect” among internet users, who might suppress or monitor their speech more carefully in fear of being penalized by the government.

Another story overshadowed by Palin melodrama was that of US Army Sergeant Chuck Luther. Sergeant Luther gave heart-wrenching congressional testimony describing his experience of being tortured at the hands of fellow US Army officials. He was confined to a small closet and deprived of sleep for a month until he signed documents that made him ineligible to receive health benefits for wounds incurred during combat. This story could have exposed a systemic problem of abuse and censorship all the way up the military chain of command if it were properly covered and investigated.

The establishment press’s version of political news exploits the personal lives of political players like Trump and Palin, instead of dissecting their stances on domestic or foreign policy. By sensationalizing inane trivialities and underreporting the real news, Junk Food News coverage grossly distorts the context and relevance of important issues in the political discourse. Whatever topics the corporate press deems worthy enough to cover at length will invariably skew the public’s perception away from the issues that should be most relevant to their lives: food, water, shelter, jobs, and education in relation to so-called defense spending—not sex scandals, drug abuse, or “reality” television.

X-Rated Headlines: Junk Men Trash the Newshole

_Weiner in general is overplayed, in every sense and phrase of the word._
—Jenn Strenger, a model to whom NFL player Brett Favre texted X-rated photos

Before 2010, the word “junk” mostly referred to “trash,” or “something of little meaning, worth, or significance,” according to family-friendly dictionaries. After everyman Jon Tyner recorded his confrontation with agents of Transportation Security Administration (TSA) at San Diego Airport over refusing to submit to a groin check, the word “junk” took on a new meaning, quite literally. “Touch my junk, and I’ll have you
arrested,” Tyner told TSA agents over a thirty-minute cell-phone recording which earned Tyner fifteen minutes of fame, as his story was featured on the Huffington Post and retold across the corporate media.\textsuperscript{25} Tyner became a celebrity known as “The Junk Man,” and was elevated by conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer to the level of a “folk hero,” singing the “anthem of the modern man, the Tea Party Patriot, the late-life libertarian, the midterm-election voter,” one fighting against “Obamacare” and other big government impositions.\textsuperscript{26} While “The Junk Man” provoked a newsworthy discussion about the invasiveness of TSA’s security procedures, which included full-body scans and pat-downs for those who “opt-out,” the coverage quickly veered into a circus of double entendre highlighting the fad of the catchphrase.\textsuperscript{27} “So much for hiding your junk: now it’s out of the closet, and on mouse pads and panties,” reported CNN’s Jeanne Moos, referencing a segment devoted to the catchphrase, which highlighted products and parodies inspired by it.\textsuperscript{28} Moos’s narration—filled with puns playing on the new definition of junk—was itself a parody of news: the report focused not on the security procedures, but on the efforts to cash in on the catchphrase and turn it into panties and other mass-manufactured junk (literally).

While Tyner may have made “junk” a household word, quarterback Brett Favre and New York State Representative Anthony Weiner made news for purportedly texting theirs to women. Much like Tiger Woods the year before,\textsuperscript{29} superstar Favre found himself in hot water when the sports website Deadspin posted a video with recordings and an e-mail message which they claim were sent by Favre to model Jenn Sterger, culminating with an image of his penis. The post was viewed over five million times, shared on Facebook over thirty-two thousand times, and was covered in the corporate media by the Associated Press (AP), USA Today, and CNN, among others.\textsuperscript{30} The Huffington Post posted a poll asking readers if they believed it was really Favre’s “junk” (60 percent believed so).\textsuperscript{31} The incident not only made Sterger famous, much like the women in the Tiger Woods scandal, but also pushed MTV to run a Public Service Announcement to discourage “teens from sending naughty photos.”\textsuperscript{32} Apparently, New York Representative Anthony Weiner did not watch MTV’s PSAs on the dangers of sexting, as he was caught—like Favre—sharing illicit photos with women online.
“Weinergate” became the dubious title of the corporate news media’s fascination with Weiner’s exchange of messages and photos with various women online. According to Pew’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, Weiner was “easily the top newsmaker” for the week of June 6 to 12, 2011, more than doubling the number of stories focused on President Barack Obama.33 Pew called it “the scandal that launched a thousand puns,” such as the Philadelphia Daily News front-page headline “Weiner Bares All.”34 Even Favre’s “sexting victim” Sterger believed the coverage of Weiner was excessive, calling it “overplayed.”

Tyner, Favre, and Weiner were turned into “Junk Men” by the corporate media, who couldn’t get enough of their junk as news. Tyner’s real gripe with the TSA became a punch line not only on comedy shows, but in real news coverage: Favre and Weiner’s “sex scandals” turned the front page into the gossip page, turning headlines into punch lines themselves. “News outlets apparently could not resist relying on double entendres to describe the episode and some of the coverage had an inevitably giggling quality to it,” Pew reported, showing readers that the news had become entertainment—literally. And in this way, valuable national airtime was degraded into the traditional meaning of junk: “something of little worth, meaning, or significance.”

Weiner—the most overexposed “Junk Man” of the bunch—not only titillated the public, but in doing so, distracted them from serious news. Journalist Anne Landman highlighted the problem at the heart of the coverage, explaining that it “diverted attention from a huge number of truly important domestic and global issues, for example that the US is spending two billion dollars a week in Afghanistan while cutting desperately-needed programs and services here at home.”35 As the irrelevant tale played out, Americans were treated to less or no coverage of stories such as the Global Commission on Drug Policy declaring the war on drugs a failure,36 90 percent of Petraeus’s captured “Taliban” turning out to be civilians,37 outgoing CIA director Leon Panetta’s claim that US troops will be asked to stay in Iraq after the 2011 deadline,38 ThinkProgress’s report on the $2.5 trillion that the Bush era tax cuts have cost the country,39 or that one in four US hackers work for the FBI.40 In short, “Weinergate”—and the rest of the Junk Men stories—have been a distraction offering nothing useful to people’s lives while undermining the democratic process.
Forbes blogger Susannah Breslin claimed that the popularity of junk—in every sense of the word—is the fault of the American people. She argued that it is our sublimated urge to cheat on our own spouses that is to blame for the intense media coverage of sex scandals. “Americans are fascinated by political sex scandals because the politician is doing what Americans are doing but won’t admit, or what they wish they were doing but won’t say, and Americans, rather than confess their natural tendencies or sexual fantasies, would rather criticize those political figures who there, but for the grace of God, are doing what Americans wish they were doing.” Breslin might be right. In the age of Networked News, Americans are certainly complicit in sharing these stories on social media, helping to hype and promote gossip. At the same time, it is the establishment media’s responsibility not to confuse gossip with news, or entertainment with information. But as we’ve said before at Project Censored, that’s infotainment.

II. NEWS ABUSE AS PROPAGANDA: FRAMING THE MESSENGERS

The print media is dying—is anemic. Television no longer makes any serious attempt to report news in the sense that a traditional journalist would understand it. We are diverted by trivia, gossip, celebrity scandal, whether that is revolved around a lunatic fringe figure that wants to burn Korans, or Tiger Woods’s sexual escapades, or John Edwards’s meltdown.

There are these constant narratives that dominate the news cycles and make it impossible for those of us who care about actually reporting news and investigating serious issues to even find a place any more.

—Journalist Chris Hedges, in an interview with OpEd News’s Rob Kall

News Abuse is a category created by former Project Censored director, Dr. Peter Phillips. Phillips noticed that there wasn’t only Junk as news, but that serious news stories often took a turn into a trivial, even titillating direction that took away from the significance of a particular story. News Abuse, like most propaganda, often has some truth to it, and the information contained within may even be true. However, the story may not be as significant as the corporate media hypes it to be. In the process, the news media can lose sight of what a given story is
really about, and can miss important facts along the way that may alter the entire meaning of the story. Lost in the moment, these News Abusers seldom go back to contextualize or add to previously reported stories which then linger in the public mind, albeit in a confused, distorted, or even outright erroneous way.42

Here are a few examples of some of the more important and lingering News Abuse stories of this past year, followed by an in-depth analysis and case study of News Abuse as propaganda concerning the public debate and framed news coverage of education reform.

**The Sherrod Charade**

The resignation of Shirley Sherrod over alleged racist comments made while addressing the NAACP

On July 19, 2010, Tea Party activist and conservative pundit and blogger, Andrew Breitbart, posted on his BigGovernment.com website an excerpt of a speech given to the NAACP by Georgia State Director of Rural Development for the United States Department of Agriculture, Shirley Sherrod.43 The heavily edited video clip of the speech, in which comments made by Sherrod could be construed as racist, was picked up by FoxNews.com and spread across the blogosphere before airing on *The O’Reilly Factor* that same evening where host Bill O’Reilly called for her resignation. The story was picked up by all the major media outlets provoking condemnation from government officials, media pundits from the left and right, and even the president of the NAACP. Sherrod, who resigned that same day, was later exonerated when the video of the entire speech was vetted, resulting in apologies from many people involved, including President Obama. The mishandling of the story was so egregious that, in a rare mea culpa, even Bill O’Reilly of Fox News offered an apology to Ms. Sherrod for “not doing my homework.”44 In his apology, O’Reilly admitted that he depended upon Breitbart for “facts” without bothering to confirm them. This was an astounding confession given that Breitbart had been exposed as a dubious source.

In 2009, Breitbart demonstrated that he was a conservative political strategist operating in the blogosphere. That year he published propaganda videos against Democrat-supported ACORN.45 A year
later the attorney general’s office in both California and Massachusetts discovered the videos to be “heavily” falsified and edited.\textsuperscript{46} However, as in Sherrod’s case, the lies behind the ACORN videos were uncovered after the damage had been done. O’Reilly and other complicit media figures clearly ignored Breitbart’s standing as a right wing propagandist when they used his work in the Sherrod scandal.

In 2011, Breitbart demonstrated that he was not just a propagandist, but also addicted to airtime. On June 6, 2011, Anthony Weiner provided a tearful apology for the sexual indiscretions Breitbart helped expose. Breitbart appeared at the event providing multiple interviews and speeches for reporters “before, after and during” Weiner’s admission. He claimed he had been at a hotel nearby and showed up “to watch myself be vindicated.”\textsuperscript{47} Breitbart’s comments insinuate that he was the one experiencing character assassination under unfair scrutiny from the Sherrod charade. However, he was anything but scrutinized as he smiled and glowed while the press treated him like a journalist instead of the political operative and propagandist that he is, based on the Sherrod and ACORN incidents, among others, discussed later in this chapter.

**Ground Zero Intolerance**

Major coverage of protests over the building of the “Ground Zero” mosque which was neither at “Ground Zero” nor strictly a mosque

In May 2010, the so-called “Ground Zero Mosque” set off a firestorm around the nation. The would-be controversy was started by conservative bloggers Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer. Both Geller and Spencer, founders of Stop Islamization of America, were given a platform on Andrew Breitbart’s website.\textsuperscript{48} Geller and Spencer spoke out against proposed plans for the building of an Islamic community center in downtown Manhattan. The center was to be built in an abandoned Burlington Coat Factory building, blocks from the former site of the World Trade Center towers.\textsuperscript{49} Despite the building site being neither a mosque nor located at Ground Zero, Geller and Spencer dubbed the project the “Ground Zero Mosque.”\textsuperscript{50}
The corporate media ran with this title unquestioningly and introduced the issue as a controversial one, claiming that real debate needed to take place about what amounted to the right of a group or individual to buy or lease private property. Corporate media figures continued to claim that the so-called mosque was going up “at Ground Zero” despite its actually being two blocks away. The Boston Globe claimed “an Islamic center so close to Ground Zero is, not surprisingly, controversial” while the New York Post reported, “A mosque rises over Ground Zero” and Fox News reported on the rallies against the “proposed mosque near ground zero.” Defenders of the project fed into the negative discourse by constantly repeating the phrase “Ground Zero Mosque.”

This memetic fodder worked in favor of politicians looking to criticize President Obama, who had erroneously been characterized as a Muslim previously by many in the corporate press. In an egalitarian society like America, one that purports to have freedom of religion and respect for all people, whether or not one is a Muslim should have no bearing on public debate on private property development. Yet, the issue ignited controversy that was exploited for potential political gain. Leading up to the midterm elections, conservatives and Tea Party activists heavily promoted the “Ground Zero Mosque” meme, provoking several protests against plans for similar projects across the nation. Fox News demonstrated its keen bias in reporting when it reported on Obama’s support for the mosque. Obama did support the construction of the center, but FOX vilified him while censoring a key piece of information about its own parent company: that the second largest shareholder in News Corporation was Saudi Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, who was helping to fund the Islamic Center. His interest in the project would have been bad for the network’s ratings so the focus remained on Obama, Democrats, and the effects of the “mosque” on the upcoming election.

This story demonstrates the danger that the current corporate media structure not only allows, but increasingly relies upon. The term “Ground Zero Mosque” was created by bloggers with a racist and xenophobic political agenda. The facts were falsified in their assessment since the “Ground Zero Mosque” lacked a mosque and was not at Ground Zero. The major media outlets, rather than do investigative
work to uncover these distortions and report the facts, picked up the story and terms and reported them out of context, and as fact. Thus, Fox and other networks were able to use the story as a public opinion weapon against political rivals. They only told part of the story, one that benefited their interests and ignored the rest. The reporting was aimed to deceive, not inform the populace; it was propaganda. Unless people demand more from their media and shut off those who engage in manipulation, this News Abuse will likely continue.

**Shooting the Messenger**

**WikiLeaks hysteria and Julian Assange as arch villain**

On April 5, 2010, WikiLeaks released a classified US military video of Iraqi civilians and two Reuters news staff being gunned down by a US Apache helicopter in the suburb of New Baghdad. This led to an outburst among US journalists and political figures, not necessarily about the content of the story, but about the leak itself. The corporate media talking heads focused on the legality of the release rather than question the legality of what the video and other WikiLeaks releases revealed about US policy and actions around the globe. It became a classic case of shoot the messenger.

Almost immediately, the media was calling for the death and/or trial of WikiLeaks head Julian Assange (he was even accused of treason by some even though he is not a citizen of the US). A debate continues over whether the documents are innocuous or a national security threat. In March 2010, Pentagon officials claimed the cables were a threat, but in December 2010, they claimed they did not rise to the level of national security breaches. Government officials are also divided over whether Assange’s involvement was in fact illegal. Texas Congressman Ron Paul argued that Assange has the same protections as the media, while Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell and Vice President Joe Biden called Assange a “high tech terrorist.”

The corporate media did not oft investigate the WikiLeaks releases as a topic for debate. Instead, WikiLeaks itself and Assange were the focus, and were portrayed as criminals or worse. The content of the cables went mostly undisputed during the assault on Assange. In December 2010, the corporate media reported on the sexual miscon-
duct charges against Assange and neglected to mention inaccuracies of the report. However, Stockholm police reported that the whole scandal was nonsense; both women involved in the case stated that the sex was consensual, and the charges amounted to having sex without a condom. It should also be noted that Assange’s chief accuser has ties to possible CIA funded anti-Castro front groups so it wasn’t just some random person with whom he had been involved (and the accuser’s background should raise other questions the corporate media did not ask). Without mentioning these important details, the media continued to focus on Assange and the dubious charges against him while ignoring the content of WikiLeaks cables.

The case against WikiLeaks exemplifies the US government’s vulnerability to exposure of wrongdoing by brave and hardworking investigative journalists. The corporate media are not those people. Instead, they sided with most government officials and took dubious police reports at face value because doing so was easier than researching the cables’ content and assessing their impact. They tried to lynch Assange instead of assail potential wrongdoings exposed in the WikiLeaks documents. The treatment of WikiLeaks exhibits the media’s dissidence with the concept of investigative journalism. WikiLeaks, which provides actual documentation of government behavior and abuse, has been vilified, while Andrew Breitbart and others who peddle smut and lies are hailed as examples of good journalism by the corporate media.

As chapter 1 of this volume explained, the US government has been pushing for internet surveillance and censorship. The WikiLeaks issue, when reported on erroneously, or only partially, provides a justification for internet censorship in the name of silencing whistleblowers to protect national security. This ignores the advancements to the democratic process that whistleblowers have historically provided. Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, which exposed the lies concerning US policy in Vietnam in the 1960s, exemplify this contribution.

In June 2011, as the Pentagon Papers were officially released by the government, Ellsberg explained, “What we need released this month are the Pentagon Papers of Iraq and Afghanistan (and Pakistan, Yemen, and Libya).” With the possibilities for free speech available on the internet, it is becoming increasingly harder for the US government to operate in the shadows. This vulnerability has propelled the
Obama administration to prosecute more whistleblowers than all other presidents combined. He and those around him can only get away with prosecuting whistleblowers like Assange (as Nixon tried to do with Ellsberg, but failed) if the people are complicit. The media-driven game of shooting the messenger is an underhanded attempt to sway public opinion against Assange while the facts and details of the WikiLeaks cables go largely unprobed. The fact that the so-called news media in the US are more interested in shooting the messenger than in protecting whistleblowers shows clearly that the Fourth Estate is merely a propaganda arm of the state.

III. CASE STUDY OF NEWS ABUSE: FRAMING, PROPAGANDA, AND CENSORSHIP

Private Enemy #1: Public Workers

“Educator and scholar Adam Bessie made clear just how devoid of thought are claims that schools should be protected from responsible belt-tightening,” writes American Enterprise Institute (AEI) resident education scholar Frederick Hess. Hess was writing in reference to the coauthor of this chapter, specifically a piece he wrote for the Daily Censored blog. Hess, an intellectual leader in the corporate education reform movement, personally attacked Bessie in direct reply to a critique he wrote of a cover story in the Oakland Tribune. The story used Hess as an authoritative, non-partisan source, without explaining that AEI is a neoconservative organization that claims, “The government’s authority to tax and regulate represents a growing encroachment on the private sector.” Hess quoted this line in his blog and argued that Hess’s association with AEI should be fully revealed so readers would know his ideological orientation. Bessie wrote, “I am not saying that Hess, nor the AEI should be avoided, but rather the reporter should report to us what their background is—for complete disclosure.” In response to a call for transparency, Hess—who received $500,000 in grant money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for AEI’s advocacy—dubbed Bessie, a community college English instructor, a “vapid champion of the status quo.”
Hess’s ad hominem attack on Bessie, however, has become the “status quo” of political rhetoric in the last year, particularly in the debates on public education, but also across the policy spectrum in the corporate media. Public workers—teachers, firefighters, police officers, and especially their unions—have been depicted as enemies of prosperity and public welfare, feeding greedily on benefits while the “rest of us” starve. This was illustrated quite literally in a popular cartoon showing a gigantic pig with “UNION” emblazoned across its chest telling a skeletal taxpayer to “tighten his belt.”

More concerning is that public workers have been cast as villains in the wake of economic collapse, not only by conservative think tanks and political cartoonists, but by the corporate (so-called) mainstream media in a broader sense. Even public supported radio KQED, of San Francisco, ran an op-ed lambasting lazy Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) employees. In early August 2010, the New York Times’s Ron Lieber accurately predicted, “There’s a class war coming to the world of government pensions.” And sure enough, as a new class of Republicans began their term in January 2011, public workers—and their supposedly excessive benefits—gained considerable coverage. The once vague term “public employee” burst into the public consciousness as a new pejorative, while the fiscal conservative buzzword “austerity” was billed as the only solution to economic woes. The latter term was the number one most searched word on Merriam-Webster online last year.

In corporate media coverage over the past year, public workers lost the class war that Lieber predicted, and became victims of persistent and systemic factual distortion and villainizing. Out of all public workers, however, teachers and their unions have fared the worst in the last year. They have been subject to relentless mythmaking, largely underwritten or influenced by billionaires such as Bill Gates, that falsely portrays the educational system as irreparably broken, with bad teachers as the primary cause and the free-market as the only viable solution, and ignoring, misrepresenting, maligning, or explicitly censoring alternative perspectives and dissent. So while the worthy topic of public education earned a great deal of coverage in the corporate media, it clearly qualifies as News Abuse because the issue itself is distorted—framed and cast as propaganda for free-market ideologues under a rubric of open debate in a supposed free press.
The Recurring Myth of the Welfare Queen

In 1976, on a failed campaign to the White House, Ronald Reagan coined one of his enduring linguistic legacies: the “Welfare Queen,” a mythical inner-city resident who wastes the public’s hard-earned money on “welfare Cadillacs” and other luxuries she can’t afford and doesn’t deserve. The misleading term suggests the false notion that welfare abuse is rampant, that money spent on social services is going to luxuries rather than necessities. While nearly thirty-five years old, the image of the Welfare Queen remains as strong as ever and Reagan’s battle against her lives on. However, now she has traded her Cadillac for a fire engine, a “Cadillac” health care plan, and a pension, as Jonathan Cohn presciently pointed out in “Why Public Employees Are the New Welfare Queens” in the New Republic, shortly after Lieber’s New York Times article. In the same way that Reagan characterized those on welfare as cheating the taxpayers out of their hard-earned money, so have public employees been framed, accused of receiving excessively generous handouts from the public. In several cases where some academics at public institutions fought against these attacks, they were targeted by conservative media activists and the Republican Party.

The mythmaking success of Reagan’s Welfare Queen is critical to understanding how public workers have been portrayed as “public enemies in some way,” as an AP story claimed “some people” saw it. The Welfare Queen—a Chicago black woman cheating the social service system—“was a symbol of everything that was supposedly wrong with welfare,” explained University of California, Berkeley, cognitive linguist George Lakoff in an analysis of the term. While this example symbolized the evils of the welfare state, the actual Welfare Queen, whom Reagan claimed “has eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve Social Security cards,” did not exist; even though the “media dutifully tried to find her . . . there never was such a person.” Even though Reagan never explicitly called the Welfare Queen black, he nonetheless invented a powerful stereotype that played the political race/class card, exploiting a fictional denizen of Chicago who “came to stand for a whole category of welfare recipients.” Reagan’s Welfare Queen worked because it fit existing cultural stereotypes—or frames—
about those on welfare. Lakoff further argues that Reagan presented his made-up example as a typical case, and because it received so much press, the Welfare Queen became very real to the public, even if she did not really exist. As a matter of fact, “the majority of welfare recipients are white and few own vehicles of any kind.” This fact didn’t matter, as Reagan’s Welfare Queen furthered the myth that most people on welfare are black and cheating the system.\footnote{76}

Public employees have now become mythologized in the same way Welfare Queens were almost three decades ago. In the last year, “public employee” has become a bad word, a symbol of greed and undeserved excess, one that is responsible for our crumbling budgets, and thus, our own struggling economy. An NPR listener shares in a “Perspectives” segment on San Francisco’s public radio station KQED an anecdote of lazy DMV workers which, like the Welfare Queen, is supposed to be typical of all public workers. “There is only one person serving a long line of customers. As I wait, I watch her coworkers, who should be helping me, eat birthday cake. . . . It seems in the eyes of public employees, my needs come second—after cake.” Just like the Welfare Queen, this single instance of nameless and anecdotally related bad service becomes a stand-in for how public employees are lazy and disinterested in serving the public, and are receiving benefits they don’t deserve while thumbing their noses at the public in true let-them-eat-cake fashion.

Like the Welfare Queen, the term public employee allows negative stereotypes of public workers to flourish. The perfectly ambiguous term sounds more like a faceless, heartless bureaucrat than a public servant risking her or his life for the common good, as is the case with firefighters or police. The term strips away the humanity and the nobility of a public worker, replacing it with an uninspiring, and certainly unrespectable, blandness. Further, by using the term “employee,” rather than “worker,” or even specific job descriptions like “firefighter,” any associations with work or labor are eliminated; it’s much easier to visualize a lazy employee than a lazy worker or an undeserving firefighter. And thus, with the vague term “public employee,” the NPR “Perspectives” segment is able to use the fallacy of overgeneralization via a couple of DMV workers as a symbol of all government workers, implying that this one instance (which may or
may not be real) symbolizes the work that firefighters, police, and teachers perform across the system. And this is aired on public broadcasting, not only in the corporate media.77

Media coverage also tends to add to the perception that public workers are somehow welfare cases that the rest of the taxpayers support (even though public workers clearly pay taxes). “The media have repeatedly targeted public employees by suggesting that the public dislikes their supposed generous pay and benefits,” though numerous polls demonstrate that the public tends to side with employees, as the liberal group Media Matters for America illustrated with a thorough review of corporate media coverage.78 A popular 2011 article in the Associated Press, cited in the Media Matters analysis, vividly shows the mischaracterization of public workers. The following passage, in particular, reinforces distorted notions of public workers’ compensation. “At its heart, the issue is this: Some public workers get a sweet deal compared to other workers. And it’s taxpayers who pay for it. That’s set off resentment in a time when economic dole drums have left practically everyone tightening their belts.”79 While the reporter uses the phrase “public worker,” he also uses fiscally conservative language nearly identical to the political cartoon mocking unions when he references “belt-tightening.” Further, while the reporter acknowledges that polls show two in five Americans are not on the employees’ side, it is nonetheless the focus of the report, titled “Anger brews over government workers benefits.” The title—and the article itself—all but ignores the two-thirds who are not angry, implying that the anger is far more widespread than it actually is. This is called framing, and this particular form, propagandistic in its nature, is a form of News Abuse.

The aforementioned AP story reinforces this distorting frame by giving disproportionate coverage to studies and scholars that claim public workers are compensated on a greater scale than private sector workers.80 For instance, while the reporter interviewed locals in Wisconsin, he did not refer to an April 2010 study conducted by two University of Wisconsin economics professors, which found that the opposite is in fact true: that state and local workers make less, overall, than those in the private sector. “This recession calls for equal sacrifice, but long-term patterns indicate that the average compensation of state and local employees is not excessive,” the authors conclude.
“Indeed, if the goal is to compensate public and private workforces in a comparable manner, then the data do not call for reductions in average state and local wages and benefits.” Additionally, two weeks before the AP story, the Economic Policy Institute released a study that “indicates that state and local government employees in Wisconsin are not overpaid.” Neither of these studies was mentioned by AP, nor any study that contradicts the majority of the interview subjects who state, as undisputed fact, that public worker benefits are excessively generous in comparison to private sector worker benefits.

Professors Get a Lesson in “Advanced Thuggery”

President of the National Historical Association William Cronon was personally targeted for critiquing Governor Scott Walker’s attempt to end public employee collective bargaining rights. Cronon, a distinguished professor of history, geography, and environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, posted a blog and published an op-ed in the New York Times in which he placed Gov. Walker’s effort to diminish public union rights in a greater historical context of the rise of conservative thinking since the late 1960s. In his blog, Cronon attributes this success to the well-funded conservative intellectual infrastructure, especially the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a free-market organization that drafts “model” bills which conservative legislatures use around the country. “Each year, close to 1,000 bills, based at least in part on ALEC Model Legislation, are introduced in the states. Of these, an average of 20 percent become law,” ALEC’s website claims, a fact Cronon also pointed out.

Following his blog and New York Times essay, the Wisconsin Republican Party filed an Open Records Request to access his e-mails, requesting “copies of all e-mails into and out of Prof. William Cronon’s state e-mail account” which referenced terms like “Republican, Scott Walker, collective bargaining . . . rally, [and] union.” The search also asked for names of Republican legislators. Further, The Mackinac Center, a Michigan based conservative think tank born of the GOP political turnaround Cronon describes, filed a similar Freedom of Information Act request for the labor studies departments at Wayne State University, University of Michigan, and Michigan State Univer-
sity.\textsuperscript{86} “Legally, Republicans may be within their right,” \textit{New York Times} columnist Paul Krugman observed. “But there’s a clear chilling effect when scholars know that they may face witch hunts whenever they say things the GOP doesn’t like.” And while Cronon will be able to withstand the assault, he claims that “less eminent and established researchers won’t just become reluctant to act as concerned citizens, weighing in on current debates; they’ll be deterred from even doing research on topics that might get them in trouble.”\textsuperscript{87}

This “chilling effect” goes against the principles of academic freedom, part of the bedrock of a vibrant democracy, like a free press. Also, this First Amendment intimidation came far sooner than Krugman might have predicted. Around the same time as the Cronon controversy, two labor studies professors at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, and the University of Missouri, Kansas City, were targeted by Andrew Breitbart’s conservative \textit{Big Government} blog. “We’re going to take on teachers next, we’re going to go after the teachers, the union organizers,” Breitbart told Sean Hannity on Fox News.\textsuperscript{88} Shortly thereafter, Breitbart released videos of the professors purportedly promoting violence, which he titled “advanced thuggery.”\textsuperscript{89} Much like with Shirley Sherrod (discussed earlier in this chapter), it turned out that Breitbart’s video of her speech was edited to take parts of it out of context. Sherrod was made to appear to be saying the opposite of what she really was, just as the professors were made to look like they were supporting the use of violence in protests, which is not at all what they were advocating. Gail Hackett, provost of the Kansas City campus, released a statement denouncing the videos: “From the review completed to date, it is clear that edited videos posted on the internet depict statements from the instructors in an inaccurate and distorted manner by taking their statements out of context and reordering the sequence in which those statements were actually made so as to change their meaning.”\textsuperscript{90} In other words, the Breitbart videos were doctored—they were propaganda passed on as news and just another form of News Abuse.

Despite the fact that the film was factually inaccurate, adjunct professor Don Gilgum resigned under what he claimed was pressure from his Dean, who in turn had been told by “higher ups” to get his resignation—much like the Sherrod incident in the federal government. Gilgum, in an interview with \textit{Inside Higher Education}, described the
chilling effect of Breitbart’s attack: “Teachers here are no longer going to be able to express comments, theories or counter-positions or make statements to force students to push back and critically challenge the comments and statements of the teacher.” In that type of educational climate, it seems critical thinking will be impossible to teach, and free speech will be difficult to encourage inside the classroom where it is supposed to be modeled as a great American virtue.

**The Myth of the Bad Teacher**

In the 2011 Columbia Pictures film *Bad Teacher*, Cameron Diaz is the titular awful instructor, slouched behind her desk with dark glasses covering her sleeping eyes, who “doesn’t give an ‘F,’” according to the tagline. In the preview, she gets motivated to teach only when she can get a bonus for test scores so that she can buy breast implants to impress the new substitute teacher played by Justin Timberlake. Diaz’s Bad Teacher is much like the Welfare Queen or the Public Employee: it is no one specifically, but rather a sort of free-floating, ill-defined stereotype, one who is an inept, uncaring, and self-interested bureaucrat waiting for an oversized pension—one not only disinterested in students, but actively engaged in standing in the way of student achievement, rather than encouraging it. Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show* captured the bad teacher stereotype hilariously, as faux-reporter Samantha Bee showed off the “luxurious” apartments of middle-class public school teachers. Following the 2010 release of the education documentary *Waiting for Superman*, however, this bad teacher and her protector, the Evil Union, were no laughing matter. These lazy, self-interested, poorly trained, and overpaid public workers appeared to be endemic, and primarily responsible for the state of ruin in public schools—at least according to persistent and consistently misleading coverage in the corporate (and even some independent) media.

*Waiting for Superman* (*WFS*) promotes the myth of the Bad Teacher, the Broken School, and the Evil Union most vividly and forcefully. The promotional poster for *WFS* looks like the set for the zombie TV series *The Walking Dead*, as an innocent, uniformed child sits attentively at her desk amidst a bombed-out wasteland, the undead surely waiting just outside the frame, hungry for her youthful brain. This apocalyptic
imagery is reinforced by the dire title—Superman, after all, is only called in to save the world from crashing asteroids or malevolent plots by arch-nemesis Lex Luthor. And to make this end-times comic book real, disaster documentarian Davis Guggenheim, famous for the global warming documentary An Inconvenient Truth, was tapped to direct the film. Just as An Inconvenient Truth highlighted the emergency of global warming, so did WFS seek to highlight the disaster happening in American public schools. AEI’s Hess wrote that WFS “chronic[ed] the travails of five students seeking spots in heavily oversubscribed charter schools.”94 The “superheroes” of the film are charter school advocates like Geoffrey Canada, and “teacher’s unions are big screen villains,” as a review in the conservative Weekly Standard observed.95 The head of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, is painted not just as a villain, but as “something of a foaming satanic beast,” a reviewer from Variety magazine noted.96 A conservative blogger’s post on Weingarten depicts a devil, and added “teacher union leaders have approximately the same level of credibility on education reform as tobacco executives have on cancer research.”97 WFS, in short, pits Bad Teachers and Evil Unions against education reformers and engaged parents trying to save innocent children, in an epic battle worthy of an action-packed comic book. The script for this comic book version of education reform comes straight from the pages of neoconservative educational philosophy.

Hess observes that WFS has been powerful in calling attention to the free-market reforms he advocates at AEI: “[WFS] drew rave reviews, star-studded premières, and breathless talk of a new era of reform. While the American Federation of Teachers and a handful of liberal publications tut-tutted the film’s critical portrayal of teacher’s unions, its clarion call for change has been embraced by opinion leaders across the political spectrum.”98 President Obama had the children from WFS visit the White House,99 Roger Ebert initially gave it a thumbs up,100 and former sitcom star Alyssa Milano tweeted the film’s greatness to all of her 1.5 million followers.101

Despite the powerful emotional pull of the film, scholars on both sides of the political spectrum have serious concerns about some of its questionable factual content. Diane Ravitch, the Secretary of Education under President George H. W. Bush, former supporter of President
George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” policy, and author of the best-selling book *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, calls *WFS* “propagandistic” in an extensive review of the film. The film, she argues, maligns public schools and places charter schools on a pedestal through selective reporting of facts. The children—and the charter schools they try to attend—are supposed to present a typical view of American students, and America’s public and charter schools. Yet, “No successful public school teacher or principal or superintendent appears in the film; indeed there is no mention of any successful public school, only the incessant drumbeat on the theme of public school failure,” Ravitch observes. Further, she claims that the film oversells the success of charter schools. *WFS* “quietly acknowledges” a study that finds only one in five get “amazing” results, which means performance superior to public schools; yet, it doesn’t acknowledge that in the very same study, 37 percent of charter schools are considered worse than their public counterparts. Further, *WFS* paints the charter schools portrayed in the film in a more flattering light than the evidence suggests: even though Canada’s school purports to have “amazing results,” the film neglects to note that in its 2010 tests, “60 percent of fourth-grade students in one of his charter schools were not proficient in reading, nor were 50 percent in another.” The film also neglected to point out that “Canada kicked out his entire first class of middle school students when they didn’t get good enough test scores to satisfy his board of trustees.” Finally, even as the film maligns unions as an impediment to school reform, it applauds Finland as a country “the US should emulate.” Yet the documentary neglects to tell viewers that Finland has a “completely unionized workforce.” Even Hess—who would no doubt disagree with Ravitch on many of these points—agrees that the film has created a “goopy groupthink symbiosis with the Paramount marketing operation,” which left him feeling that “large doses of cynicism are in order.”

Still, despite the fact that two influential scholars on the left and right of the education debate called for further exploration of the claims made in the film, *WFS* met with almost no criticism in the corporate or so-called liberal media, as a result of an enormous, exceptionally well funded and strategized marketing campaign. Thus, *WFS* was able to perpetuate negative stereotypes about public schools and their teachers, and to pave over any dissenting opinions.
WFS was more than a film: it was a corporate media movement heavily cross-promoted across highly influential platforms on the air, in print, and online. WFS’s end-times vision of education was brought to life on Oprah in a TV segment cross-promoting “The Shocking State of Our Schools,” in which Oprah Winfrey interviewed Guggenheim, then Washington, DC, superintendent and icon of the free-market reform movement Michelle Rhee, and billionaire Bill Gates, whose Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation gave Paramount a two million dollar grant to market the film, and has spent hundreds of millions focused on the reforms it documented. In the program, Oprah claims that the students featured in the film are “eager to get an education,” but have to fight their way through a “system riddled with ineffective teachers.” NBC stalwart Tom Brokaw echoed Oprah in a report for NBC Nightly News. Promoting the NBC Special Program Education Nation, Brokaw broadened the bad teacher motif to more of a systematic educational conspiracy that ensured students wouldn’t learn. Brokaw asked a new teacher if she had met resistance from “the teacher establishment,” authoritatively confirming to any naysayers that a) there is one, and b) it consists of “unions” and “veteran teachers.” Brokaw, echoing WFS, stated as fact that unions were impeding students and contributing to problems in education. According to the Education Nation press release, the program was promoted for an entire week on NBC programs Meet the Press, Nightly News, Today, Your Business, as well as on network affiliate stations MSNBC (partially controlled by Bill Gates’s Microsoft), CNBC, Telemundo, MSNBC.com, and NBCLearn.com.

It is not surprising that WFS gained such mass attention while providing a platform for free-market education reform as it was heavily financed by billionaires invested in the very reforms applauded in the film. In an e-mail conversation with coauthor of this chapter Adam Bessie, Ravitch explained the complex web of interests of those who financed the film, which included several free market think tanks and organizations, but also, and perhaps especially, Microsoft’s Bill Gates. Gates seems to have exerted the most influence in pushing the national dialogue toward focusing on bad teachers and broken schools. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helped subsidize Education Nation, which Gates appeared in. Brokaw interviewed Gates but did
not challenge the corporate reform ideas or present any opposing views.\textsuperscript{109} Similarly, a *Time* magazine editorial promoting the film, “Waiting for Superman’: Education Reform Isn’t Easy,” was written by an educational policy analyst whose blog is underwritten in part by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.\textsuperscript{110}

Gates’s and other billionaires’ PR investment in WFS has paid off, as the myth of the Bad Teacher, the Broken School, and the Evil Union blanket the corporate and even so-called liberal media—CNN, the *Huffington Post, The Colbert Report, Oprah,* and *Real Time with Bill Maher*—have all uncritically repeated the claims made in WFS, as *Daily Censored* blogger, veteran teacher, and education professor Paul Thomas points out in his numerous essays analyzing media coverage on education.\textsuperscript{111} Thomas observes that Rhee and other WFS and *Education Nation* supporters made a “celebrity tour” of the corporate media, where they promoted the claims from the film without serious analysis.\textsuperscript{112} Even NPR, which Republicans routinely attempt to defund for being too liberal, “offered Rhee an unchallenged forum for spouting common sense without a shred of evidence.”\textsuperscript{113}

*WFS*, in conjunction with heavy promotional support, created a largely uncritical media circus that ended up promoting stereotypes about public school teachers, unions, the education system, and even charter schools themselves. In his satiric review of the film, AEI’s Hess snidely jokes, “Happily, my earlier skepticism is gone. Much like Winston in 1984, I now feel pleasantly persuaded. You see, the peer pressure finally got to me and, just hours ago, I walked out of the theater with my eyes, finally, wide open.”\textsuperscript{114} And as the “goopy groupthink” faded, as the “celebrity tour” ended, and critical reviews of the film’s factually distorted arguments by scholars like Diane Ravitch and others began to come out, film critic Roger Ebert—who had originally given the film a “thumbs up,” took back his review, writing on Twitter: “Why maybe ‘Waiting for Superman’ wasn’t all that it seemed. If I’d known, my review would have been different.”\textsuperscript{115}

**Corporate Deformatory School: The New Rhetoric of “Productivity”**

Sitting alongside Hess at an AEI session entitled “The New Normal:
Doing More With Less,” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan gave a speech on how to make public education work in tight budgetary times. During the course of the speech, Duncan said “productivity” seventeen times and “learning” five times.116 Indeed, Duncan’s speech at a neoconservative think tank reveals a “New Normal,” where the language and policies of the corporate world and the free-market are being proposed as the only solutions to what ails education. Duncan’s corporate pose is unsurprising, as his boss President Obama has been applauding the corporate reform message, according to Hess. “Interviewed in October on the Today Show, President Obama seemed to be channeling a generation of conservative education analysts in stating bluntly that more money absent reform won’t do much to improve public schools.”117 And the “corporative takeover of American schools,” as Paul Thomas calls it,118 has gone all but unchallenged in most media, as a result of powerful advocacy not only from the Obama administration but three billionaire venture philanthropists.119

In the last year, education reform has become a euphemism for a very specific philosophy: a free-market one, which Fred Hiatt of the Washington Post called “the Obama-Duncan-Gates-Rhee philosophy of education reform.”120 As Joanne Barkan observes in a comprehensive investigative report on private spending in education policies, reform has come to mean “choice, competition, deregulation, accountability, and data-based decision-making.”121 In other words, this means supporting policies that either privatize public education, or turn public education into a simulation of the private sector. This includes, as Barkan shows, “charter schools, high-stakes standardized testing for students, merit pay for teachers whose students improve their test scores, firing teachers and closing schools when scores don’t rise adequately, and longitudinal data collection on the performance of every student and teacher.”122 In other words, the “Obama-Duncan-Gates-Rhee” education reform movement means pushing public schools from a model of cooperation to one of competition, as Ravitch points out, “turning schools into a marketplace where the consumer is king.”123

The “Big Three”—the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation—have invested billions in trying to turn schools into a marketplace, and tens of millions in advocacy to influence national policy, according to
Barkan. The editors of the Hoover Institution’s education journal *Education Next* agree: “Prodded by Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and other veteran private-sector reformers, the Obama administration has lent unexpectedly forceful support to such causes as common standards, better assessments, charter schools, merit pay, refurbished teacher preparation, and the removal of ineffective instructors.” In her research, Barkan found that Gates and Broad joined forces, “funding a $60 million campaign to get both political parties to address the foundations’ version of education reform.” In their annual report, the Broad Foundation claimed that “the stars have aligned” with the election of President Obama and Secretary Duncan. And according to Barkan, the foundations got a return on their investment, as the Obama administration’s education plan titled “Race to the Top,” “came straight from the foundations’ playbook, including testing-based accountability and charter schools.” This should not be surprising, as Duncan, before coming to the White House, referred to his work with Gates in the Chicago school system as a “partnership.”

In much the same way, “The Billionaire Boys Club” (as Ravitch has called them), has heavily invested in public advocacy, working to sway media coverage toward corporate education reform, often covertly. According to the *New York Times*, the Gates Foundation has spent seventy-eight million dollars on education advocacy, which includes a vast intellectual and communication infrastructure. “It’s easier to name which groups Gates doesn’t support than to list all of those they do, because it’s just so overwhelming,” noted a graduate student who had studied the Gates Foundation’s advocacy in the article. This funding has gone to support research, the major education publication *Education Week*, proxy bloggers, and has gone to develop a Koch Brother’s-style Astroturf organization called Teach Plus, which, according to its website, supports teachers in writing op-ed’s, and creating and influencing policy. In one striking example covered by the *New York Times*, Teach Plus members spoke against tenure, describing “themselves simply as local teachers who favored school reform,” without mentioning their affiliation or training. Teach Plus, which has received over four million dollars in grants from the Gates Foundation claims that “none of Teach Plus work in Indianapolis is supported by Gates funding.” (Within days, this statement disappeared from
its website). As the New York Times article reports, “Few policy makers, reporters, or members of the public who encounter advocates like Teach Plus or pundits like Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute realize they are underwritten by the foundation.”

Hess—a recipient of a half million dollars from the Gates Foundation—also acknowledges how the influence of educational venture philanthropists like Gates works to dull or silence criticism. Both Barkan and Ravitch cite Hess’s book With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy is Reshaping K-12 Education, in which he finds that “[A]cademics, activists, and the policy community live in a world where philanthropists are royalty—where philanthropic support is often the ticket to tackling big projects, making a difference, and maintaining one’s livelihood.” Because academics can only take on projects with money, Hess contends, they are hesitant to bite the hand that may feed them. “Not a single book has been published that has questioned their education strategies,” Ravitch paraphrases Hess. Further, Hess found that the corporate media also avoided criticism of the “Big Three’s” educational advocacy: in a study from 1995 to 2005 of the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, Newsweek, and Associated Press, Hess found that there were “thirteen positive articles for every critical account.” Hess himself acknowledges that he feels “constrained” by taking money from Gates: “There can be an exquisite carefulness about how we’re going to say anything that could reflect badly on a foundation.” Hess concludes in the New York Times article that “everyone is implicated” in what he called, in The Best of Intentions, an “amiable conspiracy of silence.”

Diane Ravitch and the “Conspiracy of Silence”

“Diane Ravitch is in denial and she is insulting all of the hardworking teachers, principals and students all across the country who are proving her wrong every day,” Secretary of Education Duncan told Newsweek senior editor Jonathan Alter. The interview, in an editorial blog which attempted to debunk Ravitch, was titled “Don’t Believe the Critics: Education Reform Works.” Alter published the blog for Bloomberg News, a media organization owned by billionaire New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who instituted “the Obama-Duncan-Gates-Rhee philos-
ophy of education reform” in New York City. In the blog—and another Newsweek editorial—Alter applauded the reforms made in New York, the very same reforms Ravitch spends a chapter critiquing in The Life and Death of the Great American School System.137 This coordinated attack on Ravitch illustrates what happened when she broke the “conspiracy of silence,” around the free market education reform movement. In the last year, Ravitch was ignored, censored, and when given a voice, publicly flogged for critiquing the policies heralded in WFS.

Ravitch’s The Life and Death of the Great American School System is the product of what she calls an “intellectual crisis.”138 An education historian who studied trends in American education over the last hundred years, Ravitch was a fierce advocate of free-market reforms, worked for George H. W. Bush as Secretary of Education, promoted George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) policy, and helped found the Koret Task Force at the Hoover Institution. “Like many others . . . I was attracted to the idea that the market would unleash innovation and bring greater efficiencies to education,” she says.139 Ravitch had her “epiphany around NCLB in November 2006” at an AEI conference focused on NCLB: “I went to a meeting . . . to hear a series of studies of how NCLB was working. . . . They were not, and at the end of the day, I concluded (and said publicly) that NCLB was not working.”140 She began to see the free-market movement she supported as another one of the ill-fated education fads that she had studied throughout her career, and found, “I had drunk too deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix to intractable [sic] problems. I too had jumped aboard a bandwagon.”141

With The Life and Death she jumped off the bandwagon, and was consequently no longer welcome on the national stage. In Education Nation, “she was represented in a thirty-second-long clip, and otherwise completely blocked from participating. Waiting For Superman director Davis Guggenheim refused to share the stage with her on any program,” Anthony Cody, a veteran urban public school teacher observed in his blog for Education Week.142 Pop musician John Legend played a far more prominent role in the program on education reform than did Ravitch, as did the CEO of Netflix.143

Further, in an e-mail conversation with coauthor Bessie, Ravitch claimed that she was censored from debating free-market reformers
in the corporate media. Ravitch claimed, “My book publisher has tried repeatedly, but I can’t get onto any of the national TV shows to challenge Gates, Rhee, et al.” Further, Ravitch noted: “I have published many, many op-eds in the New York Times, but for the past year, my editor rejected every idea, proposal, suggestion. So I stopped offering, realizing that the door was closed.”

Months after the PR blitz of WFS, Ravitch broke through the corporate media blockade with an appearance on The Daily Show, NPR, and finally the New York Times. In her op-ed, “Waiting for a Miracle School,” Ravitch claimed that both President Obama and New York Mayor Bloomberg inflated the results of the studies they cited in order to better promote the success of their free-market reforms. Ravitch went on to discuss the studies in more detail, providing readers with a more complete picture of the research. Arne Duncan and Jonathan Alter made scathing critiques immediately following Ravitch’s op-ed. Both attempted to discredit Ravitch’s work and her personally. Alter claimed, “She’s the education world’s very own Whittaker Chambers, the famous communist turned strident anti-communist of the 1940s,” and accused her of using “phony empiricism.” Yet, just two weeks before, Ravitch was awarded the Daniel Patrick Moynihan Prize of the American Academy of Political and Social Science. The Board of Directors includes esteemed social scientists from Harvard and Yale and the award is given to those “who champion the use of informed judgment to advance the public good . . . while contributing to the civility of public discourse and pursuing a bipartisan approach to society’s most pressing problems.”

And while AEI’s Hess thinks Ravitch is misguided in her analysis, he nonetheless appears to agree with her concerns that proponents of corporate reform—like Duncan—may be “overpromising” on the results of these education policies. In a 2010 essay, Hess even foreshadows Ravitch’s 2011 New York Times essay by suggesting that reform proponents, when faced with criticism, may “oversell ideas as miracle cures.”

In the last year, when the vital issue of public education finally came to the forefront of the corporate media, Ravitch, a respected voice with a relevant, award-winning work of scholarship, was effectively censored from the corporate media for making a research-based critique of the Obama administration’s educational program—one supported
by the vast financial interests described herein. As a result, the public was deprived of a valuable dissenting perspective on an issue of national interest, and was left with an education discussion that resembled an advertisement for free-market education policies rather than an authentic and complex debate. Indeed, the treatment of Ravitch—and of public education and public workers in general—is an example of News Abuse in its most virulent form.

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

*Listen to me: Télévision is not the truth! Télévision is a God-damned amusement park! Télévision is a circus, a carnival, a traveling troupe of acrobats, storytellers, dancers, singers, jugglers, side-show freaks, lion tamers, and football players. We’re in the boredom-killing business! So if you want the truth... Go to God! Go to your gurus! Go to yourselves! Because that’s the only place you’re ever going to find any real truth.*

—Howard Beale, from the 1976 film *Network*

Given that so much attention has been paid to the topic of Junk Food News, News Abuse seems to be a more under-covered, yet very problematic and increasingly ubiquitous category that merits additional serious attention in terms of the efficacy of proffered solutions for big news media failures. In fact, News Abuse is propaganda, and should be seen and understood as such. In more contemporary parlance, it is more specifically framing and spin. These issues in particular, along with attacking, the use of labels, distortion, overgeneralization, and the straw person fallacy all work to create a faux news landscape that must be called out. New models of independent journalism must be based on accountability, transparency, and full factual reporting if we are to be serious about being our own governors. This is what the American people need as the failures of the news media mount and Junk Food News exponentially expands, depriving the body politic of the fact-based, substantive discussion it needs to be healthy and to survive. Unless we embrace the positive possibilities of grassroots, democratic, independent journalism, including the use of new communications technologies, time just might be running out for real change to unfold and we may be severed not only from reality, lost in
“electronic hallucination,” but from the promises of our country’s founders to future generations of Americans.

Carl Jensen prescribed a possible way to cure the press of their Junk Food habits almost twenty years ago that goes unfulfilled, but which still stands as sage advice worth considering. Jensen wrote, “The corporate media owners should start to earn their unique First Amendment privileges. Editors should rethink their news judgment. Journalists should persevere in going after the hard stories. Journalism professors should emphasize ethics and critical analysis and turn out more muckrakers and fewer buckrakers. The judicial system should defend the freedom-of-the-press provision of the First Amendment with far more vigor. And the public should show the media it is more concerned with the high crimes and misdemeanors of its political and corporate leaders than it is with dinosaurs, sluts, and adulterers.” Or with Tiger’s Blood and Birthers. At Project Censored, we strongly believe that Jensen’s prescription is still one worth fulfilling, and is necessary for maintaining a vibrant and functional democracy.

MickeY Huffman is the director of Project Censored, an associate professor of history at Diablo Valley College, and a member of the board of directors of the Media Freedom Foundation.

Adam Bessie is an assistant professor of English at Diablo Valley College, and he cowrote “Manufacturing Distraction: Junk Food News and News Abuse” in Censored 2011. Last year, Bessie analyzed media coverage on education reform for Daily Censored and Truthout, on which much of the case study in this chapter is based. His scholarship on metaphor and framing was published in the academic journal Inside English, and cited extensively in 2011 peer-reviewed article featured in the Journal of Psychoanalytic Inquiry written by a former president of the International Psychoanalytic Association. He thanks his wife and public school history teacher, Corin Greenberg, for her tireless support and inspiration.

Abby Martin holds a BA in political science from San Diego State University. She has years of experience working as a news correspondent, editor, and producer for internet television, and now writes investigative reports for multiple publications. Abby pioneered the creation of Media Roots, a grassroots citizen journalism project, to help inform and connect the conscious community. She is a member of the board of directors of the Media Freedom Foundation. You can check out her media organization at www.mediaroots.org, her art at www.abbymartin.org or follow her on Twitter: twitter.com/AbbyMartin.
Clifton Roy Damiens is a junior at the University of California, Berkeley, and Nolan Higdon is a graduate student in history at San Diego State University. Both are Project Censored interns.

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Notes
6. Ibid.


32. “Jenn Sterger: Sexts, Start-Ups, and Single Life.”
34. Ibid.
42. For the original and more detailed definition and explanation of News Abuse, see Peter Phillips, ed., Censored 2003 (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004), 196.


57. WikiLeaks, “Collateral Murder,” WikiLeaks, April 5, 2010, http://www.collateral-murder.com/. With the closing of WikiLeaks original site, the link above is to one of their many mirror sites.


66. “Corporations,” American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, http://www.aei.org/supportCorporations. Please note that the original quote from above was changed in the last few months: “The growth in the size and scope of the federal government represents a direct threat to the values AEL shares with the private sector—the engine of America’s freedom and prosperity.” For further information on AEL, see SourceWatch: http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?Title=American_Enterprise_Institute.

91. Ibid.


98. Hess, “Pyrrhic Victories.”


105. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation provided Participant LLC a one-year grant of $2 million to “execute a social action campaign that will complement Paramount’s marketing campaign of Waiting for Superman.” See http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Grants-2010/Pages/Participant-Media-LLC-OPP1019819.aspx.


111. Paul Thomas has written a number of essays on this topic over the last year, which will be collected in the forthcoming book Ignoring Poverty in the US: The Corporate Takeover of Public Education (North Carolina: Information Age Press, 2011).


117. Hess, “Pyrrhic Victories.”


122. Ibid.

123. Ravitch, Death and Life, 221.

124. Barkan, “Got Dough?”


126. Barkan, “Got Dough?”


130. For more information on Teach Plus financing from the Gates Foundation grant page see http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Grants-2009/Pages/Teach-Plus-Incorporated-OPP1003735.aspx.
132. Barkan. “Got Dough?” For the original source, see Frederick Hess, ed., With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy is Reshaping K-12 Education (Massachusetts: Harvard Educational Publication Group, 2005).
133. Ravitch, Death and Life, 201.
134. Barkan, “Got Dough?”
135. Ravitch, Death and Life, 201.
138. Ibid., 1.
139. Ibid., 10.
143. NBC Education Nation Press Release.
144. Diane Ravitch, e-mail message to Adam Bessie, January 22, 2011.
145. Diane Ravitch, e-mail message to Adam Bessie, June 1, 2011.