One early criticism of Project Censored was from editors and publishers claiming that what the project refers to as *censorship* is simply a disagreement with the decisions they make regarding what is or is not newsworthy. During the first published volume of Censored research in 1993, founder Carl Jensen addressed this complaint and discussed the reasoning behind his creation of the Junk Food News chapter:

“Many news professionals have said that the issue isn’t so much censorship (or self-censorship) per se, as it is a difference of opinion about precisely what information is important to publish or broadcast. They also point out that there is finite amount of time and space for news delivery—about twenty-three 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 struck me as a legitimate argument, so I decided to review the stories that editors and news directors consider to be most worthy of filling their valuable time and space. However, in the course of this research project, I did not find an abundance of hard hitting investigative journalism. Quite the contrary. Indeed, what did become evident was a journalistic phenomenon I call Junk Food News (JFN), which, in essence, represents the flip side of the “Best Censored Stories”. The typical JFN diet consists of sensationalized, personalized and homogenized trivia... The problem is not the lack of time and space for news, but the quality of the news selected to fill that time and space. We’re suffering from news inflation—there seems to be more of it than ever before, but it isn’t worth as much as it used to be.

News should be nutritious for society. We need more steak and less sizzle from the press. The news should warn
us about those things that make our society ill, whether economically, politically, or physically. And there is such news out there, as Project Censored has revealed time and again.”
—Carl Jensen, *Censored 1993*

Carl’s words become more relevant with each passing year, as celebrity baby booms eclipse increasing infant mortality and the homes of the wealthy overshadow the growing rate of homelessness in America. As the available entertainment becomes increasingly titillating, real news (about the government, economy, foreign policy, etc.) appears increasingly less so. And the corporate executives that run the newsrooms of today know on which side their bread is buttered.

This year’s Junk Food News list is packed with entertainment goodies and celebrity tidbits so fattening that they may only be safely read on a treadmill at the gym. Here is the 2007 edition of the high calorie journalism we call Junk Food News:

1. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt get together
2. Nick Lachey and Jessica Simpson break-up
3. American Idol hits an all time high
4. The Runaway Bride that didn’t
5. Martha Stewart is back in town
6. Brokeback Mountain breaks through
7. Britney Spears (it just wouldn’t be a list without her)
8. Myspace infiltrates our space
9. Steroids in Baseball get pumped up
10. The DaVinci Code ad nauseum

1. On March 20 of 2006, newspapers and television news programs were abuzz with speculation that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie might have gotten married at George Clooney’s villa on the coast of Italy. It turned out not to be true, but the very possibility made our hearts flutter in anticipation, didn’t it?

Of course, it was not the biggest story of the day on March twentieth (the third anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq), but it did beat out an avalanche of interesting tidbits that were readily available on any newswire. You weren’t nearly as likely to hear about an Iraqi
Police Report charging U.S. troops with the deaths of local, non-combatant civilians (sound familiar?). You also weren’t as likely to hear about a new study by glaciologists warning that the world’s mountain glaciers are melting at a faster rate than at any time in the past 150 years.

On the plus side, the Archbishop of Canterbury picked that day to announce that he does not believe creationism should be taught in schools and he called upon U.S. fundamentalists to discontinue their campaign to force the issue in public classrooms. It was big news in Europe, but there was not a peep in the U.S.


2. As Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey quickly transformed from the “Newlyweds” to newly divorced, their spot on Project Censored’s Junk Food News list jumped from number 5 in 2006 to number 2 in our 2007 edition. Nick and Jessica’s divorce, on December 16, 2005, was announced by The Associated Press, the Los Angeles City News Service, The Times Union of New York, and The Seattle Times. On that same day the vote for a new parliament was being held in Iraq. Nick and Jessica’s uncoupling probably garnered more airtime than every other divorce combined—but hey, does anybody know how Iraq’s election turned out?


3. On the evening of January 17, 2006, FOX launched a two-hour season premiere to kick off the fifth season of American Idol. The most-watched television network program drew 35.5 million viewers—the best opening and audience for any non-sports program in the 2005-2006 television season. That very same week, Pakistani jeweler Shah Zaman lost two sons and one daughter in a U.S. air strike near his home in a poor region of the Northwest Frontier Province. A total of eighteen citizens died in the attack (none of them related to al Qaeda
or insurgent organizations), prompting Pakistan to file a formal protest with the Americans. Thousands marched in protests chanting anti-American slogans.

The FOX network is able to correctly tabulate the amount of votes needed to end someone’s career on a karaoke television show, but the most sophisticated military that has ever existed still cannot differentiate innocent villagers from its latest military adversary.


4. Number four on this year’s Junk Food list is the saga of Jennifer Wilbanks, “The Runaway Bride” from Georgia. At first, the situation seemed like a serious news story of a woman gone missing, possibly abducted by kidnappers. But just as her fiancée and family members had convinced police to embark on an extensive ‘woman’ hunt, the erstwhile bride-to-be showed up with a common case of “cold feet”. Dubbed “The Runaway Bride,” mainstream media quickly adopted the ridiculous story as their front-page pet, as police investigated the criminal status of Wilbank’s runaway stunt and morning talk shows hosted in depth exposés of her wedding melodrama. On May 26, 2005, The Runaway Bride was indicted in court. On that same day there was a manhunt underway for Jordanian exile al-Zarqawi. Who was found first?


5. According to the American Journalism Review, in March of 2005, coverage of Martha Stewart’s legal woes had exceeded coverage of the crisis in Darfur by at least five times. On August 3, 2005, a week before she was due to complete her five months of house arrest, the media announced that Martha’s sentence was to be extended by three extra weeks. While it wasn’t the biggest story of the day (it lost out to Iraq and the celebrity steroid abuse scandal), media speculation over what violation could have engendered such a penalty sucked up enough airtime to squeeze out other news. Martha’s minor sentence
adjustment was more vital to the American public than a report that Chevron had paid Nigerian troops to kill outspoken critics—or that space shuttle astronauts were reporting they had witnessed “widespread environmental destruction on Earth” while in space. Both stories were available on the newswires that day, but went ignored by the corporate press.


6. When Ang Lee’s Brokeback Mountain was released in theaters in December 2005, viewers were enthralled or outraged by the story of unrequited love between two gay cowboys. And the press offered countless articles on the subject. During the “Oscar buzz” of March 2006 there were 680 Brokeback Mountain articles published nationally over a one-month period. During the same month, international protests marked the build up to the third anniversary of the U.S. invasion in Iraq and President Bush’s budget proposal announced a slash in funding for almost every social program within the federal government. While FOX’s Bill O’Reilly criticized movies like Brokeback Mountain, lamenting their corrosive influence on the values of American society, he apparently took no issue with Bush’s budget plan targeting programs in education, the arts, social security, health care, housing subsidies, and drug-free schools.


7. On February 7, 2006, photos were published of pop sensation Britney Spears operating a motorized vehicle without a seatbelt, her infant son seated on her lap. While America worried over baby Sean Preston’s future with a mommy like Brit, the President’s new budget requested nearly $1 billion in cuts to education. Defense budget spending in 2007 would rise another seven percent to $440 billion dollars while child-survival and health programs would be cut by 20 percent. The budget also requested that funding for the Corporation
for Public Broadcasting be slashed by $53.5 million in 2007 and $50 million more in 2008. Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass. remarked, “Oscar the Grouch has been friendlier to the Sesame Street characters than President Bush, who has chosen to make huge cuts to children’s television programming. The public broadcasting system represents the last stronghold of quality child-oriented programming—we owe this to America’s children.” The general public will probably not learn about this until it is too late, but we will almost certainly hear every detail of Ms. Spears parenting foibles.


8. “My myspace” has become a popular catch-phrase on campuses, in clubs, and at home. The new online social forum has given voice to thousands of underground bands, filmmakers, and countless adolescents with teenage angst. Myspace has taken blogging and chatting to a new level, giving users a whole page to display their “unique” qualities.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, Myspace.com enjoyed a plethora of media headlines ranging from a Connecticut teacher being suspended for chatting with his students on Myspace, to Rupert Murdoch’s purchase of Intermix (the Myspace parent company) on July 19, 2005. In January 2006, while millions of Myspacers were watching David Lehre’s new short film, “Myspace: The Movie”, the Christian Science Monitor released an article about the government’s development of a massive computer system that can collect huge amounts of data on Internet users. Meanwhile, on the same day, Myspace reported that site registration had reached 58 million. Did these users know that there could possibly be a huge file locked away in some government office tracing every download, blog, and site they visit? Maybe Myspace.com should add a feature for concerned users entitled “MyGovernmentSpace,” for people who want to know what information is being compiled in their government folder.

9. In early March 2006, the U.S. media was abuzz with the next exposé on the steroids in baseball saga. On March 8, 2006, San Francisco Chronicle reporter Lance Williams appeared on the CBS Early Show. While he discussed the physical transformation and alleged steroid use by Giants superstar Barry Bonds, another case was brewing in Barry and Lance’s hometown. That very same day, San Francisco supervisors passed a motion seeking the impeachment of President Bush. They claimed he failed to carry out his responsibilities by leading the country into war in Iraq and eroding civil liberties, among other indiscretions. The ruling also called for the impeachment of Vice President Dick Cheney. Supervisor Chris Daly said the measure was especially critical in light of the federal government’s insufficient response to hurricane Katrina and revelations about a domestic wiretapping program.


10. Wrapping up the Junk Food News list for 2007 is the well-promoted novel, and America’s favorite controversy du jour, The Da Vinci Code. The buzz surrounding the novel and motion picture can be traced in mainstream media throughout the U.S. from April of 2005 through at least June of 2006—more than one year of continuous commentary on the celebrated Da Vinci Code. On September 8, 2005, MSNBC ran a Stone Phillips’ special entitled “Secrets behind The Da Vinci Code,” which took the audience on a dramatic journey through the controversy and religious scandal that has gripped the imagination of the U.S. public. During this same week, in early September of 2005, Hurricane Katrina had struck New Orleans, devastating the lives of millions. Although both the Da Vinci Code and Hurricane Katrina were highly publicized in the American media, the country’s citizens might have benefited more from a revelation of the secrets behind FEMA and the controversies surrounding the failure of support for the hurricane victims than from the minutiae behind a second-rate piece of literature and a less-than-impressive summer blockbuster.

News Abuse

A few years ago, Project Censored researchers began to notice news stories that can not appropriately be called “Junk Food” but that eventually take on the role of Junk Food News (repetitive, salacious reporting taking the place of actual, informative news). Initially these stories expose an event worthy of coverage. But, in the end the story overwhelms headlines, primetime segments, and internet news sites, skewing the essential facts of the story and over emphasizing its importance. While coverage of these stories inundates the public with redundant information and useless trivia, unwritten news stories go unheard for lack of space.

Here are the top five News Abuse stories as voted on by the Project Censored community:

1. Natalie Holloway
2. Bird Flu
3. Finger in Wendy’s Chili Bowl
4. Dick Cheney Shoots Friend
5. Katrina Criminals in Superdome

1. By June 2005, everyone had heard the story of Natalie Holloway, the eighteen-year-old from Alabama who disappeared on May 30, the last night of her vacation in Aruba. What you probably did not hear about was what happened in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, three days before the date of Natalie’s disappearance. Tens of thousands of people marched through the border city to demand that authorities do more to stop a wave of violence that has left perhaps thousands of cases of murdered and missing women unsolved and unpunished. Most of the protesters were young students, Natalie’s age, who were given the day off to attend the state legislators’ organized march. They came to protest a series of bizarre incidents in which young women, all maquiladora factory workers, were sexually assaulted, asphyxiated, and dumped in the desert. As of May 30, 2005, the day when coverage of Natalie’s disappearance began, federal investigators said that at least 350 women have been killed in Ciudad Juarez.
since 1993. Estimates throughout the entire region put the number closer to 1,500. For over a decade, independent journalists have tried, unsuccessfully, to get the story major coverage on U.S. television.


2. Like the terror alert updates in 2002, forewarnings of avian flu pervaded the twenty-four hour news channels throughout 2005. The specter of a world wide influenza pandemic is nothing to be taken lightly and news editors were warranted in their decision to cover such a possibility. But most U.S. coverage of the avian flu focused on the potential for genetic mutations that would make it more deadly, and comparisons to the 1918 influenza pandemic that took some 500,000 lives (despite the fact that the Avian Flu has, as of 2006, caused less than 125 deaths worldwide).

In 2005, the fact that a U.S. company had developed a vaccine for the avian flu, and its stock price was increasing, received some scant coverage in the press. Yet, though the information was readily available, no one in the mainstream mentioned that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was chairman of the board of Tamiflu’s parent company (Gilead Sciences) until he became Defense Secretary in 2001—and that he is still a major stockholder. Since Rumsfeld became Defense Secretary, Gilead’s stock price has gone from around $7 per share to slightly above $50 a share in 2006. In October 2005, as Tamiflu was becoming the hottest drug in the world market, the Pentagon announced it had stockpiled quantities of Tamiflu for members of the military.


3. On March 22, 2005, thirty-nine-year-old Anna Ayala claimed that she had found a human fingertip in her bowl of chili. Officially announced on March 23, 2005, the story of the Wendy’s chili finger debacle instantly became national news. Not only was it heavily cov-
ered in mainstream media across the West Coast, it was also covered in mainstream newspapers on the East Coast and in the Midwest for five days straight. Though equally unappetizing, what you were less likely to hear about was that during the same month the U.S. government had begun approving the shipment of previously unapproved (and untested) genetically modified corn to supermarkets across the country. Although a finger in a chili bowl is certainly disgusting, one would think the prospect of the government foisting untested pseudo-corn onto unsuspecting U.S. consumers would make news on a larger scale.


4. “The shot heard ’round the world” took on a whole new meaning when Vice President Dick Cheney wounded fellow hunter Harry Whittington. Cheney maintained that he had accidentally sprayed his friend with pellets from behind as he, Cheney, was aiming at a quail. From February 13-17, ABC, CBS, and NBC were consumed with the story, running it as the lead every day except for Thursday of that week. News stations managed to rack up fifty-nine minutes of “Cheney sticking to his guns.” While the hunting accident gave rise to a short, vicious round of Cheney-bashing, none of it amounted to anything substantive or far-reaching. Most criticism focused on Cheney’s inclination to pass the blame and “control the intelligence,” as if this was somehow an unusual occurrence in the vice-presidential office. Only the Guardian of London examined Cheney’s behavior following the incident in the context of the extraordinary (and unique) secrecy powers bestowed upon him in 2003. In the U.S., the opportunity to investigate and perhaps question the vice-president’s behavior throughout his tenure was not taken, and it quickly passed. The following week, true to mainstream news tradition, the story died as quickly as it had arisen. A lexis/nexis search of the months following the accident found it difficult even to determine how Mr. Whittington was recuperating from his so-famously inflicted wounds.

Sources: Blumenthal, Sidney. “Cheney has a vice-like grip: Bush has granted his deputy the greatest expansion of powers in US history,” Guardian (London), March 3, 2006; VandeHei, Jim and
Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst natural disasters in history to hit the United States. In New Orleans alone, the event gave rise to a host stories. The people who fled, the people who couldn't flee, the warnings that had been given, the failure of FEMA, the rebuilding contracts so quickly granted and so slowly acted upon, the workers who were abused and, finally, the canals that broke. On August 29, 2005 the Industrial Canal in the heart of New Orleans was breached and over three meters of water flooded the Ninth Ward, the poorest neighborhood in the city. FEMA was slow in providing aide and many sought shelter in the Superdome and Civic Center. As might be expected, the unstable and devastating circumstances brought out both the best and the worst in people.

Most people worked together to better an untenable situation, sharing food and blankets, caring for each other's young and elderly. But it seems the only information getting through to network and cable news programs was that a violent mob rule had overtaken the Superdome. Reports of rapes, assault, murder, and looting plastered headlines everywhere. ABC, CBS, and NBC covered 263 minutes of Hurricane Katrina the week that the first levee broke. The overwhelmingly black population was often portrayed as amoral and vicious rather than as an uprooted community struggling with the many challenges (including crime) that would likely arise in the aftermath of one of the worst floods in American history. Although some coverage revealed the social injustices occurring in urban areas, more often than not, it painted criminals and non-criminals alike with the same brush.