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Undercovered

The top 10 Project Censored stories last year

By Amanda Witherell, San Francisco Bay Guardian

The daily dispatches and nightly newscasts of the mainstream media regularly cover terrorism, but rarely discuss how the fear of attacks is used to manipulate the public and set policy. That's the common thread of many unreported stories last year, according to an analysis by Project Censored.

Since 1976, Sonoma State University has released an annual survey of the top 25 stories the mainstream media failed to report or reported poorly. Culled from worldwide alternative news sources, vetted by students and faculty, and ranked by judges, the stories were not necessarily overtly censored. But their controversial subjects, challenges to the status quo, or general under-the-radar subject matter might have kept them from the front pages. Project Censored recounts them, accompanied by media analysis, in a book of the same name published annually by Seven Stories Press.

"This year, war and civil liberties stood out," Peter Phillips, project director since 1996, said of the top stories. "They're closely related and part of the War on Terror that has been the dominant theme of Project Censored for seven years, since 9/11."

Whether it's preventing what one piece of legislation calls "homegrown terrorism" by federally funding the study of radicalism, using vague concerns about security to quietly expand NAFTA, or refusing to count the number of Iraqi civilians killed in the war, the threat of terrorism is being used to silence people and expand power.

"The war on terror is a sort of mind terror,"

said Nancy Snow, one of the project's 24 judges and an associate professor of public diplomacy at the Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. Snow — who has taught classes on war, media, and propaganda — elaborated: "You can't declare war on terror. It's a tactic used by groups to gain publicity and it will remain with us. But it's unlikely that [the number of terrorist acts] will spike. It spikes in the minds of people."

She pointed out that the number of terrorist attacks has dropped worldwide since 2003. Some use the absence of fresh attacks as evidence that the so-called war on terror is working. But a RAND Corporation study for the Department of Defense released in August said the war on terror hasn't effectively undermined al Qaeda. It suggested the phrase be replaced with the less loaded term "counterterrorism."

Both Phillips and Snow agree that comprehensive, contextual reporting is missing from most of the coverage. "That's one of my criticisms of the media," Snow said. "They spotlight issues and don't look at the entire landscape."

The landscape of Project Censored itself is expanding. After talking with educators who bemoan the ongoing decline of news quality and want to help, Phillips launched the Truth Emergency Project, in which Sonoma State partners with 23 other universities. All will host classes for students to search out untold stories, vet them for accuracy, and submit them for consideration to Project Censored.

"There's a renaissance of independent media," Phillips said. He thinks bloggers

and citizen journalists are filling crucial roles left vacant by staff cutbacks throughout the mainstream media. And, he said, it's time for universities, educators, and media experts to step in and help. "It's not just reforming the media, but supporting them in as many ways as they need, like validating stories by fact-checking."

The Truth Emergency Project will also host a news service that aggregates the top 12 independent media sources and posts them on one page. "So you can get an RSS feed from all the major independent news sources we trust," he said. Discerning newshounds can find reporting from the BBC, Democracy Now!, and Inter Press Service (IPS) in one spot. "The whole criteria," he said, "is no corporate media."

Carl Jensen, who started Project Censored in 1976, said the expansion is a new and necessary phase. "It answers the question I was always challenged with: how do you know this is the truth? Having 24 campuses reviewing all the stories and raising questions really provides a good answer. These stories will be vetted more than Sarah Palin."

Phillips said he hopes to expand to 100 schools within the year, and would like the project to bring more attention to the dire need for public support for high quality news reporting. "I think it's going to require government subsidies and nonprofit organizations doing community media projects," he said. "It's more than just reforming at the FCC level. It's building independent media from the ground up."

Phillips likens it to the boom in microbrewed beer and the spread of

independently owned pubs: "If we can have a renaissance in beer-making, following established purity standards, then we can do it with our media, too." But for now, we have Project Censored, whose top 10 underreported stories for 2008 are:

1 ■ How many Iraqis have died?

Nobody knows exactly how many lives the Iraq War has claimed. But even more astounding is that so few journalists have mentioned the issue or cited the top estimate: 1.2 million.

During August and September 2007, Opinion Research Business, a British polling group, surveyed 2,414 adults in 15 of 18 Iraqi provinces and found that more than 20 percent had experienced at least one war-related death since March 2003. Using common statistical study methods, it determined that as many as 1.2 million people had been killed since the war began.

The U.S. military, claiming it keeps no count, still employs civilian death data as a marker of progress. For example, in a Sept. 10, 2007, report to Congress, Gen. David Petraeus said, "Civilian deaths of all categories, less natural causes, have also declined considerably, by over 45 percent Iraq-wide since the height of the sectarian violence in December."

But whose number was he using? Estimates range wildly and are based on a variety of sources, including hospital, morgue, and media reports, as well as in-person surveys.

In October 2006, the British medical journal *Lancet* published a Johns Hopkins University study vetted by four independent sources that counted 655,000 dead, based on interviews with 1,849 households. It updated a similar study from 2004 that counted 100,000 dead. The Associated Press called it "controversial."

The AP began its own count in 2005 and by 2006 said that at least 37,547 Iraqis had lost their lives due to war-related violence, but called it a minimum estimate at best and didn't include insurgent deaths.

Iraq Body Count, a group of U.S. and U.K. citizens who aggregate numbers from media reports on civilian deaths, puts the figure between 87,000 and 95,000. In January 2008, the World Health Organization and the Iraqi government did door-to-door surveys of nearly 10,000 households and put the number of dead at 151,000.

The 1.2 million figure is out there, too, which is higher than the Rwandan genocide death toll and closing in on the 1.7 million who perished in Cambodia's killing fields. It raises questions about the real number of deaths from U.S. aerial bombings and house raids, and challenges the common assumption that this is a war in which Iraqis are killing Iraqis.

Justifying the higher number, Michael Schwartz, writing on the blog *AfterDowningStreet.org*, pointed to a fact reported by the Brookings Institute that U.S. troops have, over the past four years, conducted about 100 house raids a day — a number that has recently increased with assistance from Iraqi soldiers.