



UNDERCOVERED

Annual **PROJECT CENSORED** report critiques news coverage BY JOE FITZGERALD RODRIGUEZ San Francisco Bay Guardian, joe@sfbg.com

This year's annual Project Censored list of the most underreported news stories includes the widening wealth gap, the trial of Chelsea (formerly known as Bradley) Manning for leaking classified documents and President Obama's war on whistleblowers — all stories that actually received considerable news coverage.

So how exactly were they “censored” and what does that say of this venerable media watchdog project?

Project Censored isn't only about stories that were deliberately buried or ignored. It's about stories the media has covered poorly through a sort of false objectivity that skews the truth. Journalists do cry out against injustice, on occasion, but they don't always do it well.

That's why Project Censored was started back in 1967: to highlight stories the mainstream media missed or gave scant attention to. Sonoma State University academics and students pore through hundreds of submissions of overlooked and under reported stories. A panel of academics and journalists then picks the top 25 stories and curates them into themed clusters. This year's book, *Censored 2014: Fearless Speech in Fearful Times*, hit bookstores in October.

What causes the media to stumble? There are as many reasons as there are failures.

Brooke Gladstone, host of the radio program *On the Media* and writer of the graphic novel cum news media critique, *The Influencing Machine*, said the story of Manning (who now goes by the first name Chelsea) was the perfect example of the media trying to cover a story right, but getting it mostly wrong.

The Manning case “is for far too long centered on his personality rather than the nature of his revelations,” Gladstone told us. Manning's career was sacrificed for sending 700,000 classified documents about the Iraq war to WikiLeaks. But the media coverage focused largely on Manning's trial and subsequent change in gender identity.

Gladstone said that this is part of the media's inability to deal with vast quantities of information which, she said, “is not what most of our standard media does all that well.”

The media mangling of Manning is number one on the Project Censored list, but the shallow coverage this story received is not unique. The news media is in a crisis, particularly in the U.S., and it's getting worse.

Watching the watchdogs

The Project for Excellence in Journalism, which conducts an annual analysis of trends in news, found that as revenue in journalism declined, newsrooms have shed 30 percent of their staff in the last decade. In 2012, the number of reporters in the U.S. dipped to its lowest level since 1978, with less than 40,000 reporters nationally. This

creates a sense of desperation in the newsroom, and in the end, it's the public that loses.

“What won out is something much more palpable to the advertisers,” said Robert McChesney, an author, long-time media reform advocate, professor at University of Illinois and host of *Media Matters* from 2000-2012. Blandness beat out fearless truth-telling.

Even worse than kowtowing to advertisers is the false objectivity the media tries to achieve, McChesney told us, neutering its news to stay “neutral” on a topic. This handcuffs journalists into not drawing conclusions, even when they are well-supported by the facts.

In order to report a story, they rely on the words of others to make claims, limiting what they can report.

“You allow people in power to set the range of legitimate debate, and you report on it,” McChesney said.

Project Censored stories reflect that dynamic — many of them require journalists to take a stand or present an illuminating perspective on a set of dry facts. For example, reporting on the increasing gulf between the rich and the poor is easy, but talking about why the rich are getting richer is where journalists begin to worry about their objectivity, Gladstone said.

“I think that there is a desire to stay away from stories that will inspire rhetoric of class warfare,” she said.

Unable to tell the story of a trend and unable to talk about rising inequality for fear of appearing partisan, reporters often fail to connect the dots for their readers.

One of Project Censored stories this year, “Bank Interests Inflate Global Prices by 35 to 40 Percent,” is a good example of the need for a media watchdog. Researchers point to interest payments as the primary way wealth is transferred from Main Street to Wall Street.

It's how the banks are picking the pockets of the 99 percent. But if no politician is calling out the banks on this practice, if no advocacy group is gaining enough traction, shouldn't it be the media's role to protect the public and sound the battle cry?

“So much of media criticism is really political commentary squeezed through a media squeezer,” Gladstone said, “and it comes out media shaped.”

Shaping the media

McChesney said journalism should be a proactive watchdog by independently stating that something needs to be done. He said there's more watchdog journalism calling out inequity in democracies where there is a more robust and funded media.

And they often have one thing we in the U.S. don't — government subsidies for journalism.

“All the other democracies in the world, there are huge subsidies for public media and journalism,” McChesney said. “They not only rank ahead of us in terms of being

democratic, they also rank ahead of us in terms of having a free press. Our press is shrinking.”

No matter what the ultimate economic solution is, the crisis of reporting is largely a crisis of money. McChesney called it a “whole knife in the heart of journalism.”

For American journalism to revive itself, it has to move beyond its corporate ties. It has to become a truly free press. It's time to end the myth that corporate journalism is the only way for media to be objective, monolithic and correct.

The failures of that prescription are clear in Project Censored's top 10 stories of the year:

1. MANNING AND THE FAILURE OF CORPORATE MEDIA

Untold stories of Iraqi civilian deaths by American soldiers, U.S. diplomats pushing aircraft sales on foreign royalty, uninvestigated abuse by Iraqi allies, the perils of the rise in private war contractors — this is what Manning exposed. They were stories that challenge the U.S. political elite, and they were only made possible by a sacrifice.

Manning got a 35-year prison sentence for the revelation of state secrets to WikiLeaks, a story told countless times in corporate media. But as Project Censored posits, the failure of our media was not in the lack of coverage of Manning, but in its focus.

Though *The New York Times* partnered with WikiLeaks to release stories based on the documents, many published in 2010 through 2011, news from the leaks have since slowed to a trickle — a waste of over 700,000 pieces of classified intelligence giving unparalleled ground-level views of America's costly wars.

The media quickly took a scathing indictment of U.S. military policy and spun it into a story about Manning's politics and patriotism. As *Rolling Stone* pointed out (“Did the Media Fail Bradley Manning?”), Manning initially took the trove of leaks to the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*, only to be turned away.

Alexa O'Brien, a former Occupy activist, scooped most of the media by actually attending Manning's trial. She produced tens of thousands of words in transcriptions of the court hearings, one of the only reporters on the beat.

2. RICHEST GLOBAL 1 PERCENT HIDE BILLIONS IN TAX HAVENS

Global corporate fatcats hold \$21 trillion to \$32 trillion in offshore havens, money hidden from government taxation that would benefit people around the world, according to findings by James S. Henry, the former chief