

# What You Don't Know Can Hurt You

STORIES BY PAUL ROSENBERG Senior Editor, *Random Lengths News*

## PROJECT CENSORED TAKES A HARD LOOK AT THE MEDIA'S BLIND SPOTS—AND THE OVERLOOKED STORIES THAT THREATEN OUR COUNTRY.

Checking the news hardly seems necessary these days. The news finds you.

Push notifications interrupt your dreams with dire bulletins. The president has turned the White House into a stage for his Twitter beefs—which now include the threat of nuclear war. Each day brings a fresh outrage or a new monster.

At the same time, the proliferation of mysteriously sourced stories on social media makes it harder than ever to discern which stories matter.

American confidence in the media is rebounding from an all-time low. Part of that distrust stems from a wave of lies spread by President Donald Trump and his supporters.

But a large helping of blame belongs with the corporate press and cable TV networks, who enabled the rise of a demagogue. The media aided Trump by failing to recognize his nihilistic and racist populism, and by growing addicted to the spectacle of entertaining blarney—no matter how cruel or untethered to reality.

That failure—the inability to distinguish what's important to our democracy and stubbornly cover it—is why many Americans have lost faith in their press.

It also gives renewed relevance to Project Censored. Since 1976, the annual book and reporting effort has catalogued each year's most important but underreported news stories. This year's book, *Censored 2018*, was published last week.

The project, headquartered at Sonoma State University in Rohnert Park, Calif., is the joint effort of 310 student researchers and 27 faculty, who evaluate thousands of independent news stories looking for ones that demand national attention—but haven't received it. A panel of judges then ranks the stories from 1 to 25.

The name notwithstanding, Project Censored isn't about the muzzling of a free press by government. It instead grapples with how the press has censored itself, by refusing to amplify stories with massive effects on readers and viewers. Consider it an eye test that looks for the media's blind spots.

By at least one measure, Portlanders should be heartened by this year's list. The top story is one to which this city's media paid close attention in the past year: lead in drinking water. (WW's reporting of how Portland Public Schools administrators covered up lead testing results won special recognition from the Bruce Baer Awards, Oregon's top investigative journalism prizes.)

But even here, Project Censored provides an eye-opener. The findings show that the greatest danger to public health from lead may be hidden—because the financial burden of fixing toxic pipes could soon make water unaffordable for a big chunk of the country. That's one of the patterns this year's list establishes: the way that public health is being held hostage by unaccountable companies and governments.

"The 'inconvenient facts' underlying each of these stories challenge not only fundamental institutions in our society, but also cherished notions about who we are and the values we hold sacrosanct," writes Sonoma State University professor Andy Lee Roth in the introduction to this year's book.

The 10 stories you'll read in the following pages are filled with such unpleasant facts. You may not agree with all the conclusions Project Censored draws. But grappling with news you don't like—and not just dismissing it as "fake"—is this country's best shot at digging itself out of its collective mess.

Start digging.

—Aaron Mesh, *News Editor*

### DID YOU KNOW?

## Lead in Pipes Could Soon Make Water Unaffordable for One-Third of Americans

→ After President Barack Obama declared a federal emergency in Flint, Mich., because of lead contamination of the city's water supply in January 2016, Reuters reporters M.B. Pell and Joshua Schneyer began an investigation of lead contamination nationwide, with shocking results.



In June 2016, they reported that although many states and Medicaid rules require blood lead tests for young children, millions of children were not being tested. In December 2016, they reported on the highly decentralized data they had been able to assemble from 21 states, showing that 2,606 census tracts and 278 ZIP codes across the United States had levels of lead poisoning more than double the rates found in Flint at the peak of its contamination crisis. Of those, 1,100 communities had lead contamination rates "at least four times higher" than Flint.

In Flint, 5 percent of children screened had high blood lead levels. Nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 2.5 percent of all U.S. children younger than 6—about 500,000 children—have elevated blood lead levels.

But Pell and Schneyer's neighborhood focus allowed them to identify local hot spots "whose lead poisoning problems may be obscured in broader surveys," such as those focused on statewide or countywide rates. They found them in communities that "stretch from Warren, Penn.,...where 36 percent of children tested had high lead levels, to...Goat Island, Texas, where a quarter of tests showed poisoning." What's more, "In some pockets of Baltimore, Cleveland and Philadelphia, where lead poisoning has spanned generations, the rate of elevated tests over the last decade was 40 to 50 percent."

But there's a deeper infrastructure problem involved, as Farron Cousins reported for DeSmogBlog in January 2017. "Lead pipes are time bombs," and water contamination is to be expected, Cousins wrote. The U.S. relies on an estimated 1.2 million miles of lead pipes for municipal delivery of drinking water, and much of this aging infrastructure is reaching or has exceeded its lifespan.

In 2012, the American Water Works Association estimated that a complete overhaul of the nation's aging water systems would require an investment of \$1 trillion over the next 25 years, which could triple household water bills. As Cousins reported, a January 2017 Michigan State University study found that "while water rates are currently unaffordable for an estimated 11.9 percent of households, the conservative estimates of rising rates used in this study highlight that this number could grow to 35.6 percent in the next five years."

As Cousins concluded, "While the water contamination crisis will occasionally steal a headline or two, virtually no attention has been paid to the fact that we're pricing a third of United States citizens out of the water market."

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