**Foreword**

**Censorship: Its Causes and Cures**

***Project Censored 2016***

**Nicholas Johnson**

*I had basic goals in mind and I haven’t changed those goals and they’re still not achieved. And they are, number one, to encourage professional journalists and editors to do more investigative journalism. . . . And the other goal was to get the information out about these [Project Censored-designated “censored stories”] to the general public so they are aware of them and can start looking for more information themselves.*

*--* Carl Jensen (1989)[[1]](#endnote-1)

This volume marks a landmark year for Project Censored – both the 40th Anniversary of its birth, in 1976, and the first year without its founder, Carl Jensen,[[2]](#endnote-2) to whom this Foreword is dedicated.

Project Censored’s annual story review process has been designed to select what its evaluators believe to be the best examples of stories of great significance that received little or no coverage by corporate media – ultimately revealed in a book covering two years’ stories, in this volume 2014-2015.

Of course, those who nominate stories for Project Censored’s consideration have learned of them somehow. Thus, the stories were not “censored” in the sense of being absolutely unavailable to all Americans.[[3]](#endnote-3) Most often, they first appeared in hard copy and online publications of lesser circulation. Since the Internet, their “circulation” and impact may have been substantially enhanced by personal text messages, emails, Web pages, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and the similar social media causing them to “go viral” – all of which makes their absence from corporate media the more remarkable.

Indeed, with the assistance of Google and other specialized searching tools, any skilled, serious journalist or researcher *who knows what she is looking for* has access to orders of magnitude more sources than were available forty years ago.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Nonetheless, when it comes to media, most Americans, most of the time, are not doing research. To the extent they seek out “news” at all, they are still getting most of their information, and misinformation, from the remnants of ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC, plus the 24-hour news channels, and local newspapers. And the bulk of what the cable channels bring into our homes is not even that close to journalism. As Barbara Kingsolver describes it, “the image that strikes me . . . is that of a faucet into the house that runs about 5 percent clear water and 95 percent raw sewage.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

**Mission: stories or informed citizens?** At such times, it’s often worthwhile to step back and ask ourselves, “What is it we’re really trying to accomplish? How would we know if we’d ever been ‘successful’?”

Is Project Censored’s mission limited to the individual stories that lacked more general coverage? Or is the fundamental purpose, goal or end we seek that of enhancing an informed and motivated population’s participation in a vibrant, democratic, self-governing society? If the latter, then one of our first fundamental problems and challenges may be represented by the apocryphal story of the community pollster who asked a sampling of citizens, “What is the worst problem in our city, ignorance or apathy?” The plurality answer? “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

Which is only to say that there are undoubtedly many inter-related factors and forces that contribute to what we are calling “censorship” in a contemporary U.S. context. Here are six examples:

**Audience lack of education, time and interest.** Apparently the most circulation a national newspaper can hope for (hard copy and online combined) is about 2.3 million (*New York Times*, Sunday, and *Wall Street Journal*).[[6]](#endnote-6)

Not too shabby, until one recognizes that those numbers are only one or two percent of the 320 million Americans, or their 130 million homes -- plus offices.[[7]](#endnote-7) Without commenting upon the possible relationship, those are percentages analogous to the division of America’s wealth – with the top 0.1% of Americans worth as much as the bottom 90%.[[8]](#endnote-8) Both are, in any event, percentages wholly inadequate to the maintenance of either a democratic society or its economy.

This is not to “blame the victim.” Single mothers holding two jobs to raise three kids have little free time for quality journalism or public policy research. Apathy is not a totally irrational response for someone who repeatedly experiences the seemingly intractable control of local, state and federal governments by the wealthy and powerful. And children with little or poor education, who have never had an adult parent or teacher explain and involve them in the political process, are far less likely to inform themselves, and exercise their right to vote, than those who have.

Casting more investigative journalism upon those audiences will have little more impact than casting seeds upon unprepared, baked clay soil with no fertilizer or water. If one wishes to alleviate the *consequences* of “censorship,” efforts aimed at early audience preparation would be a promising place to start.

And everyone, regardless of education, political and policy interests, has far more competition for their time in the early 21st Century than the early 20th, when it was largely limited to novels, phonograph records, live vaudeville, silent films, and the growing availability of radio.

We have now added television (broadcast, hundreds of cable channels, and streaming from the likes of Amazon, Google and Netflix), texts and tweets, trillions of Web pages, video games, and millions of smart phone apps – among the many other sponges soaking up time from our 24-hour-limited days. What are unfortunately lower quality and quantities of serious news and analysis must compete with ever more, and more attractive, distractions.

**Ownership.** But there is another need beyond a democracy’s educated population with enough leisure to become informed. Project Censored focuses on this need with its under-reported significant stories – and its implied suggestion (usually only whispered, and seldom proven by courtroom standards) of nefarious self-serving censorship by the media’s corporate owners.

This risk can become reality – as I first discovered as an F.C.C. commissioner with the ABC-ITT proposed merger.[[9]](#endnote-9) In a book at the time I described potentially dozens of examples of “corporate censorship” with the comment, “Note what each of these items has in common: (1) human death, disease, dismemberment or degradation, (2) great profit for manufacturers, advertisers and broadcasters, and (3) the deliberate withholding of needed information from the public.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

But the self-serving greed that kills individual stories (and places others), and thereby puts the economic interests of owners, subsidiaries, and advertisers ahead of the needs of viewers and subscribers, is not the only source of “censorship.”

**Time and space.** Media owners decide the extent to which they will provide *any* meaningful news and opinion on air or in newspapers, and if so how much. Even the most civic minded owner or journalist is unable to provide audiences all they need to know in the 20 minutes remaining after commercials in a “half-hour” newscast.

**Junk Food News.** Alas, few are so civic minded as to try. They fill those precious minutes with what Carl Jensen called “junk food news” – Twinkies for the brain.[[11]](#endnote-11) junk food for the brain – “junk news.” It’s what Walter Lippmann once called “sideshows and three-legged calves.”[[12]](#endnote-12) There is a devastating opportunity cost to this waste of information channels, only made worse by efforts to scare and agitate the audience.

Randomly chosen consecutive ABC Evening News promos make the point with both the subject matter selected and the adrenalin-pumping nature of its presentation: “Coming up, terror in Texas, the FBI on the scene tonight. We’ll take you inside the deadly shootout. The packed double-decker bus, the fire that erupts, the heroes that jump in. And a former student pilot that steals a plane. You will hear the audio trying to get him to land. Coming up.” And the next evening, “Coming up, our investigation, the hunt for a fugitive after that deadly attack in Texas; his secret messages. The oil tanker flipping on an American highway, the massive fireball. And a giant tree falling in a public park, landing on two children; the rescue. Coming up.”[[13]](#endnote-13)

This approach to “news” bears more similarity to what a televised version of Chuck Shepherd’s “News of the Weird”[[14]](#endnote-14) might look like than it does to anything Walter Cronkite ever put on the air. Ironically, one-time stand-up comics Jon Stewart (“The Daily Show”) and John Oliver (“Last Week Tonight”) have become, by default, among America’s most popular mainstream sources of serious news and public affairs programming.[[15]](#endnote-15)

**Resources.** The quantity and quality of reporting is impacted by available resources as well as available time: the number of news bureaus (especially overseas); the number, quality and experience of reporters; time and expense account allowances for investigative reporting; and therefore, necessarily, the amount of money the media owner is willing to expend on informing the public.

**Self-censorship.** As quoted at the outset of this Foreword, Carl Jensen’s first goal for Project Censored was “to encourage professional journalists and editors to do more investigative journalism.” Not all, but perhaps most journalists and editors would need little encouragement to comply with that goal. The obstacles to their doing so do not lie within their character or desires. Even if they are not self-driven workaholics who love the work, Pulitzer and other prizes, promotions and bonuses, public fame and the respect of colleagues provide plenty of incentives.

Many of the restraints are beyond their control, and outlined above, such as lack of resources, time on TV or space in a newspaper, plus advertisers’ and shareholders’ preferences for the ratings and profits of junk news over those for investigative reporting.

Other restraints are self-imposed – though often, sadly, not irrational. Depending on the media company’s culture, critical (“investigative”) reports and opinion pieces may be known to be the reason for other employees’ demotions, firing, inability to get work elsewhere – or even death, the ultimate censorship.[[16]](#endnote-16)

A cautious (or sensible) journalist might find that reason enough to decline assignments or explorations of stories capable of being interpreted as contrary to the interests of their company (or its parent corporation and subsidiaries), major advertisers, a pro-corporate elected official (or political party), or a U.S. president’s efforts to build support for something like our “preemptive war” in Iraq.[[17]](#endnote-17) Journalists’ concerns about the recent prevalence of government surveillance have contributed to the increase in self-censorship in journalists’ use of phones and email as well as selection of topics.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Others, sometimes perhaps irrationally timid, may choose to avoid *any* “controversial” topics.

Censorship may be the result of pressure from a corporate owner, or the frustration and timidity of an idealistic young reporter. Regardless of the cause, because it most often leaves no trail it is difficult to spot and almost impossible to prove. This can make it, in some ways, more invidious than even a government censor.

**Conclusion: “What the American people don’t know can kill them.”[[19]](#endnote-19)** This has been, in part, an effort to distinguish “ends” (the fully informed, active participation by the citizens of a self-governing democracy) from “means” (the publicizing of “censored” stories and other approaches) – while acknowledging what can be the substantial contribution of the latter to the former.

Either, or both, requires that the corporate media contribute substantially more than they have to the American people’s information and understanding of their challenges and opportunities. It’s not easy, but they simply must present a greater range of information and opinion as fully, fairly and accurately as possible.

What we don’t know *can* kill us – whether in wars that might better have been avoided, unsafe working conditions neither reported nor repaired, or drugs inadequately tested.

But that’s not all.

Engineers refer to the "signal to noise ratio" of electronic communications. Censorship eliminates the signal entirely. But as the old saying has it, “It’s not what we don’t know that’s the problem, it’s what we know that ain’t so.”[[20]](#endnote-20) “Misperceptions" are another way of confusing noise with signal. And both can as easily come from a reporter's self-censorship as from a global media conglomerate's pushing its owner's ideology or stock price.

Whether ignorance or misperception, either can or occasionally does kill one of us – along with our hopes for democracy. This volume, like those that preceded it, is our modest effort to at least slightly reduce that risk.

NICHOLAS JOHNSON, one of Project Censored's judges since its beginning, served as commissioner, Federal Communications Commission (1966-73), and chair, National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting (1974-78). (See full biography, http://www.nicholasjohnson.org/about/njbio04.html, Web site http://www.nicholasjohnson.org, and blog, http://FromDC2Iowa.blogspot.com.)

**Notes**

1. “Project Censored Over the Years: The View From Its Founder” (interview), Utne Reader, Sept./Oct. 1990, pp. 110-111; excerpted from Craig McLaughlin’s interview, San Francisco Bay Guardian, May 24, 1989.

   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Phillips, “Close to Home: A Life Shedding Light on Areas Left Dark by Corporate Media,” The Press Democrat, Sonoma, California, May 1, 2015; http://www.pressdemocrat.com/opinion/3873399-181/close-to-home-a-life. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Nor do many involve First Amendment issues. The Supreme Court has expanded the word “Congress” (in the Constitutional prohibition that “Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech,” U.S. Constitution, Amendment I) into a restriction on all governmental bodies, including local and state, not just the Congress. But its prohibition does not extend to abridgments by corporate and individual media owners. Journalists, as such, have no “First Amendment rights” vis-à-vis their editors and owners. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The Internet is an information blessing in many ways, with its overwhelming volume and diversity of sources. Google searches over 30 trillion Web pages 100 billion times a month. John Koetsier, “How Google searches 30 trillion web pages, 100 billion times a month,” VentureBeat News, March 1, 2013; <http://venturebeat.com/2013/03/01/how-google-searches-30-trillion-web-pages-100-billion-times-a-month>.

   However, precisely because of that diversity the Internet limits, rather than enhances, the kind of 1960s-style evolving national political consensus resulting from a three-major-network information economy. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Barbara Kingsolver, “The One-Eyed Monster and Why I Don’t Let Him In,” Small Wonder (2002), p. 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Christine Haughney, “Newspapers Post Gains in Digital Circulation,” New York Times, May 1, 2013, p. B5; http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/01/business/media/digital-subscribers-buoy-newspaper-circulation.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. U.S. Census Bureau, “Quick Facts,” 2015; <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Angela Monaghan, “US Wealth Inequality – Top 0.1% Worth As Much As the Bottom 90%,” The Guardian , Nov. 13, 2014; <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/nov/13/us-wealth-inequality-top-01-worth-as-much-as-the-bottom-90>. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Nicholas Johnson, “The Media Barons and the Public Interest: An FCC Commissioner’s Warning,” The Atlantic, June 1968; <https://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/media/johnsonf.htm> (describing ownership conflicts occasioned by what The Atlantic summarized as “Local monopolies, regional baronies, nationwide empires, and corporate conglomerates . . . more and more in control of the nation's communications media--newspapers, TV, radio, magazines, books, the electronic ‘knowledge industry’"). Descriptions of the ABC-ITT proposed merger, characteristics of both companies, and the author's opinions dissenting from the F.C.C. majority's willingness to approve the merger – including the risks of self-serving corporate censorship – can be found in ABC-ITT Merger, 7 F.C.C.2d 245, 278, 9 Rad. Reg. 2d (P & F) 12, 46 (1966) (dissenting opinion) [Dkt. No. 16828, December 21, 1966. 74 pp.]; http://myweb.uiowa.edu/johnson/FCCOps/1966/7F2-245.html; ABC-ITT Merger, 7 F.C.C.2d 336, 343, 9 Rad. Reg. 2d (P & F) 87, 94 (1967) (concurring statement) [Dkt. No. 16828, February 1, 1967. 4 pp.] (the F.C.C.'s permission for the intervention in the proceeding by the U.S. Department of Justice, Antitrust Division); http://myweb.uiowa.edu/johnson/FCCOps/1967/7F2-336.html; and ABC-ITT Merger, 9 F.C.C.2d 546, 581, 10 Rad. Reg. 2d (P & F) 289, 329 (1967) (dissenting opinion of Commissioners Bartley, Cox and Johnson) [Dkt. No. 16828, June 22, 1967. 62 pp.], http://myweb.uiowa.edu/johnson/FCCOps/1967/9F2-546.html. And see, Karen Beth Possner, An Historical Analysis of the ABC-ITT Merger Proceeding Before the Federal Communications Commission, 1966-1967, University of Iowa, Doctoral Dissertation, 1975; http://www.nicholasjohnson.org/about/kpabcitt.html (with links to portions of dissertation). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Nicholas Johnson, How to Talk Back to Your Television Set (3d ed. 2013), chapter 3, “The Silent Screen,” pp. 53, 59; see also, chapter 4, “New Attitudes, New Understanding, New Will: The Media and the Unheard,” p. 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See, for example, Carl Jensen, "Junk Food News 1877-2000," in Censored 2001, ed. Peter Phillips and Project Censored, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001), 251-264. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “It is because they [the people] are compelled to act without a reliable picture of the world, that governments, schools, newspapers and churches make such small headway against the more obvious failings of democracy, against violent prejudice, apathy, preference for the curious trivial as against the dull important, and the hunger for sideshows and three legged calves. This is the primary defect of popular government . . . and all its other defects can, I believe, be traced to this one. Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion (Pelican Books, 1922, 1946), pp. 275-76. And see, “Three Legged Calves, Wolves, Sheep and Democracy’s Media,” Dec. 1, 2014; <http://fromdc2iowa.blogspot.com/2014/12/three-legged-calves-wolves-sheep-and.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. As recorded by the author from KCRG-TV9, ABC, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, May 4 and 5, 2015, about 5:28 p.m. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Chuck Shepherd’s News of the Weird,” <http://www.newsoftheweird.com/index.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See “Three Legged Calves, Wolves, Sheep and Democracy’s Media,” Dec. 1, 2014; <http://fromdc2iowa.blogspot.com/2014/12/three-legged-calves-wolves-sheep-and.html>. Oliver’s commentaries can be seen on YouTube; <https://www.youtube.com/user/LastWeekTonight> (many receiving 6 or 7 million views). Randomly selected recent subjects – serious presentations interlaced with humor – have included standardized testing; death penalty; government surveillance (with Edward Snowden); Ferguson, Missouri, and police militarization; civil forfeiture; drones; net neutrality; wealth gap; prison; nutritional supplements; predatory lending; and the price of fashion. Of course, their efforts are supplemented by the more somber programming and approach of public television and National Public Radio – the latter aided by its substantial carriage of what the author views as the world’s best journalism, that of the BBC. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. "1125 Journalists Killed Since 1992," Committee to Protect Journalists, https://cpj.org/killed/; of whom 188 were murdered, https://cpj.org/killed/murdered.php. "2015: Journalists Killed," Reporters Without Borders," https://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-barometer-journalists-killed.html?annee=2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. “I sometimes tell the (apocryphal) story of a young reporter who starts out with enthusiasm. She works very hard investigating, interviewing, researching, writing, and editing an ‘investigative journalism’ article exposing the corruption of one of the major advertisers in the paper. The story is so good it may win for her a journalism prize. She proudly gives it to her editor. She never hears about it again, and it never appears in the paper. The next time she has an idea about an investigative journalism piece, about an incompetent local official, she decides to check with her editor first. He discourages her from doing the story, and she drops the idea. The third time she thinks of an investigative journalism topic (different property tax rates paid by local citizens) she not only doesn’t research and write it, she doesn’t even bother talking to her editor about it. The fourth time? The fourth time the idea doesn’t even cross her mind.” Nicholas Johnson, Your Second Priority: A Former FCC Commissioner Speaks Out (3d ed. 2008), ch. 1, “Media and the First Amendment,” pp. 1, 24 n. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. "PEN's . . . survey findings demonstrate that increasing levels of surveillance in democracies are seriously damaging freedom of expression and thought, the free flow of information, and creative freedom around the world. Perhaps most remarkably, the levels of self-censorship reported by writers in Free countries [34-42%] are beginning to approach the levels reported by writers in Partly Free or Not Free countries (as classified by Freedom House) [44-61%]." Journalists' self-censorship has increased in the context of topics chosen for writing or speaking, participation in social media, phone calls, emails, Internet searches, and Web page visits. Global Chilling: The Impact of Mass Surveillance on International Writers, PEN America, January 5, 2015, pp. 9-12, <http://www.pen.org/sites/default/files/globalchilling_2015.pdf>. And see, Project Censored's presentation of the story, with links to additional sources, "Fear of Government Spying is 'Chilling' Writers' Speech Worldwide," <http://www.projectcensored.org/fear-of-government-spying-is-chilling-writers-speech-worldwide/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. One of three quotes with which Fred Friendly began his book, Due to Circumstances Beyond Our Control (1967), unnumbered page (there credited to Dorothy Greene Friendly, 1958). The quote is an obvious play on the old saying, “What you don’t know can’t hurt you.” Jennifer Speake, A Dictionary of Proverbs (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. The quote, in a variety of forms, is variously attributed to Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and others. The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations (1987), attributes it to Josh Billings. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)