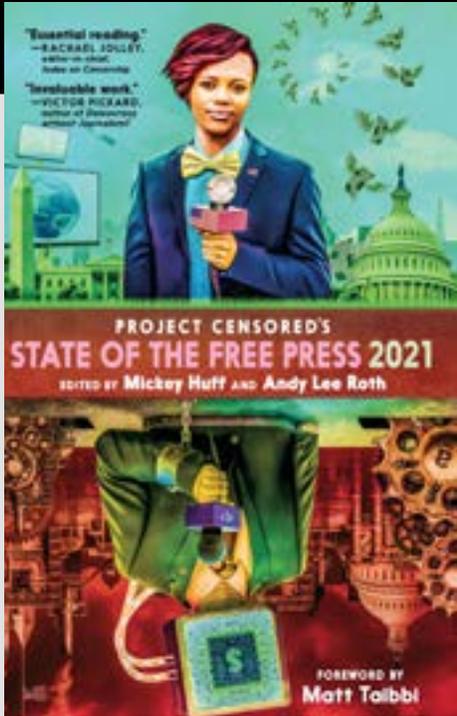


# TEACHING GUIDE



Project Censored's

## State of the Free Press | 2021

Edited by Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth

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### INTRODUCTION

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#### Countering news fatigue with critical media literacy

We depend on news to help make sense of the world. But recent debates over “fake news” and corresponding concerns that news is often corrupted by propaganda have led many Americans—including students—to distrust all news sources or, in extreme cases, to avoid following any news at all. Yet, a well-informed public is essential to democracy, and each depends on transparent, trustworthy journalism.

*State of the Free Press | 2021* ignites students' interest in news by giving them tools to distinguish whether reporting is trustworthy or not, and by showing how a truly free press is essential for social justice. The book provides a succinct and comprehensive survey of the current state of news media in the United States.

The reading strategies, discussion questions, and explorations presented here provide examples of how teachers can use *State of the Free Press | 2021* to engage students and develop their critical thinking skills in a wide variety of courses.

## Important but underreported news stories

Continuing Project Censored’s 44-year history as an internationally-respected news media watchdog, *State of the Free Press | 2021* includes capsule summaries for 25 of the most important but underreported news stories from 2019-2020. These stories cover a range of contemporary social issues that students may care about deeply, or only understand vaguely—including, for example, economic inequality, institutional racism, public health, environmental threats, and the power of people organizing together to create positive social change.

The story summaries and analysis featured in Chapter 1 offer rich opportunities for students to “flex” their media literacy muscles, by learning not only about the stories themselves but also about why stories such as these often fail to receive the widespread news coverage and public attention that they deserve.

The top 25 news stories can be read as case studies in the power of news to set an agenda for what the public understands as the day’s most important issues. As sociologist Gaye Tuchman wrote, “The power to keep an occurrence out of the news is power over the news” (quoted on p. 23).

**Introductory discussion topic:** What is “freedom of the press”? Why does it matter?

## Corporate media, Independent media

One basic aim of *State of the Free Press | 2021* is to distinguish between *corporate* news media and *independent* news media (see, for example, the Introduction, pp. 3-6). Independent news outlets first reported each of the Top 25 most important but underreported stories highlighted in Chapter 1, while corporate news outlets either completely ignored these stories or only covered them partially.

**Discussion topic:** After a brief presentation on differences between corporate-owned media and independent media, ask students to consider how *media ownership* might affect *news content*. Do we need a diversity of media owners in order to assure a diversity of media content? (For useful background on this topic, see Peter Phillips, “[How Mainstream Media Evolved into Corporate Media: A Project Censored History.](#)”)

**Going deeper:** Consider the book cover, which features original art by Anson Stevens-Bollen. How does the cover depict the difference between independent and corporate news media?

## Junk Food News

Project Censored uses the term “Junk Food News” to explain how profit-driven corporate news outlets often peddle cheaply produced, soft-serve “news” stories focused on celebrityhood, the latest trend, and other cultural meringue in place of the nutrients provided by substantive investigative journalism.

Chapter 3, “Capitalism, Celebrity, and Consuming Corona,” features analysis of some of the most distracting “junk food” news stories from 2019-2020, including the death of basketball star Kobe Bryant, President Trump’s pandemic prescriptions, and coverage of Hollywood celebrities such as Tom Hanks in quarantine during the pandemic. For each case, the chapter contrasts the corporate media’s fixation on “junk food” topics with vital stories from the same time that hardly received any news coverage.

**Discussion topic:** “Junk Food News” is a metaphor. What is “junk food”? How might some kinds of news affect our minds the way junk food affects our bodies? Introduce and discuss some examples of “Junk Food News,” from Chapter 3 and from today’s news. What sort of news do we need to be nourished, as citizens and as communities?

**Online resource:** [Project Censored the Movie: Ending the Reign of Junk Food News](#), a 63-minute documentary film, features media experts, activists, and students on junk food news and how to counter its negative effects.

**Going deeper:** Corporate news spin goes beyond “junk food” news. It also includes what Project Censored analyzes as “News Abuse”—truly important news stories that are reported in ways that distort the stories’ true significance.

Focused on cases of news abuse, in Chapter 4 of *State of the Free Press | 2021*, Robin Andersen shows how double standards and skewed framing served to mystify the public about the COVID-19 pandemic, the debate over healthcare during the 2020 Democratic primary campaigns, and mass demonstrations in Hong Kong and Chile.

Consider examining selected News Abuse stories from Chapter 4 in light of Eliot D. Cohen’s “[Digging Deeper: Politico-Corporate Media Manipulation, Critical Thinking, and Democracy](#).” Cohen’s article, available from Project Censored’s website, introduces six basic guidelines for assessing the validity of media claims and provides concrete examples of how to use them in examining actual news stories.

## EXPLORATION

## Classroom Activities that Engage Students in Hands-On Learning

1) **Patterns in story coverage.** Ask students to examine the list of the Top 25 news stories featured in Chapter 1. Are there themes (e.g., health, environment, activism) that connect two or more stories on the list? Have students describe how these stories are connected. Based on identified story themes, discuss reasons why *independent* news media might cover story topics in ways that *corporate* news media do not.

2) **Media ownership.** Who owns that news outlet? Media ownership is crucial to distinguishing between corporate and independent news outlets. Select several news outlets and have students use online research tools to determine who owns the outlet and to assess whether it ought to be considered a corporate news outlet or not.

See the Project Censored website for an extensive [list of independent news outlets](#).

The Columbia Journalism Review maintains a searchable database—“[Who Owns What?](#)”—that is useful for investigating the consolidation of media ownership in the hands of just a few major corporations.

3) **Scrutinize the advertising.** Advertising drives a lifestyle of consumption premised on market relationships and a global economy. Understanding the broader role that advertisements play in shaping our culture, the environment, and the globe is crucial if we are going to make informed decisions about what to buy (or not) and, ultimately, how we want to live. Give students the opportunity to engage in a systematic analysis of how advertisements attempt to persuade us. The following exercise is adapted from Robin Andersen’s “Commodifying the Public Sphere through Advertising and Commercial Media,” included in [The Global Critical Media Literacy Project Educators’ Resource Guide](#), which is available as a free download from the Global Critical Media Literacy Project’s website (gcml.org).

Decoding advertising messages: How do advertisements create meaning?

- What emotion, desire, anxiety, or sense of well-being is associated with the product?
- What promise is being made about the commodity?
- Can the product fulfill the promise in the advertising message?
- What are the negative social effects of such messages? Are they contradictory, misleading, demeaning to specific groups of people?
- What are the harmful environmental and social effects of the product’s manufacture, packaging, and distribution?

4) **Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model.** In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky argue that news is “filtered” to exclude stories, people, and perspectives that threaten the interests of established power and money. After familiarizing students with the five “filters” identified by Herman and Chomsky, have them pick one or more stories from the Top 25 story list from Chapter 1 of *State of the Free Press | 2021*. How might the propaganda model explain why corporate news outlets have failed to cover that story?

For more on how to combine Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model and the contents of *State of the Free Press | 2021* for use with students, see [Critical Media Literacy, Project Censored, and the Propaganda Model](#), available on YouTube. Presented at the 2020 Critical Media Literacy of the Americas Conference, this hour-long panel featured professors Steve Macek, Robin Andersen, Mickey Huff, and Andy Lee Roth, each of whom contributed to *State of the Free Press | 2021*.

5) **Who makes the news? Tracking authorized news sources.** Sources are the people and organizations that journalists rely on to develop news stories. Journalists tend to quote sources that they deem to be authoritative or important; at the same time, being quoted as a source bestows legitimacy on individuals or organizations, a process that sociologist William Gamson analyzes in terms of “media standing.”

Working individually or in groups, have students select a news story and track every instance in that story where a person or document is quoted directly. Students can track who gets quoted in terms of different aspects of identity (for example, profession and gender). After sharing their findings, the class as a whole can assess whether the sources quoted reflect a diverse range of perspectives on the topic or not.

One starting point would be to track the quoted sources from one or more of the stories featured in the book's Top 25 story list (Chapter 1). This examination can be deepened by comparing and contrasting quoted sources from independent and corporate news coverage on a given news topic. Are there differences in the patterns of who's quoted?

For one example of this type of analysis, focused on independent and corporate news coverage of LGBTQ+ issues, see April Anderson and Andy Lee Roth, “[Stonewalled: Establishment Media's Silence on the Trump Administration's Crusade against LGBTQ People](#),” from the Project Censored website.

6) **Validating independent news stories.** Project Censored's [Validated Independent News](#) (VINS) exercise engages students in research of potentially under-reported news stories, providing them

with hands-on opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills and their critical media literacy. Students (1) identify an independent news story on an issue of interest to them, (2) research the story, including tracking back to the story's original sources and investigating the extent to which the story has received corporate news coverage, and (3) summarize the story, providing a succinct, easily-read version that also assesses whether or not the story has been adequately covered by the establishment press.

In addition to its direct utility as a way to engage students' critical thinking skills, the assignment also provides students the chance to share their findings with a wider public, online via Project Censored's [Validated Independent News](#) feature, and in print as part of the Project's annual book series. (Note that each Top 25 story featured in *State of the Free Press* | 2021, includes credit to the student researcher and faculty evaluator who vetted that story.)

Complete details about the VINS exercise—including a [prompt for students](#) and a [guide for teachers](#)—can be found on the Project's website ([projectcensored.org](http://projectcensored.org)).

Supplementary materials on the VINS exercise—including sample grading rubrics and a chapter-length article that provides a complete curriculum for the assignment—are included in [The Global Critical Media Literacy Project Educators' Resource Guide](#).

For many more classroom exercises compatible with *State of the Free Press* | 2021, see [The Global Critical Media Literacy Project Educators' Resource Guide](#), which is available as a free download from the Global Critical Media Literacy Project's website ([gcml.org](http://gcml.org)).

## Project Censored: Online all-year

Beyond *State of the Free Press* | 2021, Project Censored's website provides free access to a wealth of content relevant to educators and their students. From the latest investigative journalism to a complete history of the Project's famed Top 25 story lists, the site features guidelines for how to engage students in researching [Validated Independent News](#) stories as part of the Project's Campus Affiliates Program.

The Project's [weekly radio show](#), which features expert guests analyzing current media topics, can be streamed online via the website, including past programs dating back to 2010. The website is also a portal for [United States of Distraction: Fighting the Fake News Invasion](#), a 65-minute documentary filmed and produced by Project Censored students. Overall, the website is an outstanding classroom resource for sharpening students' critical media literacy skills while learning about independent media inaction today. For more information, visit [www.projectcensored.org](http://www.projectcensored.org).

**Project Censored's *State of the Free Press | 2021* prepares students to [flex their media literacy muscles](#) in service of a more equitable, just, and inclusive society.**

**TEACHER AND STUDENT TESTIMONIALS**

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“Project Censored provides my undergraduates with a hands-on real world journalism project focused on contemporary issues of vital civilizational import, with invaluable support from the Project Censored network of professional colleagues around North America.”

—**Rob Williams, media and communications, University of Vermont, and co-editor of *Media Education for a Digital Generation***

“When students begin the process of analyzing independent news stories it is as if a lightbulb has turned on for them and they never look at media the same way again.”

—**Susan Rahman, sociology, College of Marin and Sonoma State University**

“Students find Project Censored’s learning content both engaging and empowering. I would be hard pressed to identify better critical news literacy learning content for my students.”

—**Nolan Higdon, media studies and history, CSU-East Bay and UC Santa Cruz, and author of *The Anatomy of Fake News***

“As a student, Project Censored has given me the unique opportunity to apply my knowledge of media literacy beyond a classroom setting. Because Project Censored underscores first-hand student involvement with independent news stories, it has modified my engagement with journalism to incorporate a variety of independent news organizations that report on pressing issues ignored by the hollow mainstream media.”

—**Cem Addemir, North Central College**

**PRAISE FOR Project Censored *State of the Free Press | 2021***

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“What nuts-and-bolts journalism looks like: Honest. Unflinching. Well documented. With mounting threats to democracies around the world, we need books like this one now more than ever.”

—**Aaron Delwiche, professor of communication at Trinity University, and editor of PropagandaCritic.com**

“Essential reading.” —**Rachael Jolley, editor-in-chief, *Index on Censorship***

“Project Censored has shined the light for more than forty years on those critical stories and investigative reports that government officials, major media companies, and assorted gatekeepers of ‘respectable’ journalism too often ignore.”

—**Juan González, co-host of *Democracy Now!* and professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University**