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“All Governments Lie”: Why We Need a Radical and Independent Free Press Now



Photo by Brian Wertheim

If the Government makes a mistake, the newspapers will find out and the problem may then be fixed. But if freedom of the press were lost, the country would soon go to pieces.

— I.F. Stone

Media scholar Carl Jensen was deeply influenced by the independent muckraking journalists of the twentieth century—so much so that he founded Project Censored at Sonoma State University, in 1976, in the wake of the Nixon administration’s Watergate scandal, as a watchdog organization focused on exposing “the news that didn’t make the news.” Project Censored began in a sociology course Jensen taught at Sonoma State, but quickly evolved into a national effort to promote independent journalism and news literacy. The Project produced an annual list of the most important investigative news reports, which attracted attention—and praise—from some of Jensen’s best-known contemporaries, including

broadcast journalists Walter Cronkite and Hugh Downs, reform activist Ralph Nader, and a contemporary muckraker, investigative journalist I.F. “Izzy” Stone.

Jensen’s purpose was not to tear down so-called “mainstream” media outlets but to constructively criticize their news judgment. By showing what the major media missed, or even “censored,” he hoped to improve what he saw as the lifeblood of democracy: a truly free press. Industry professionals didn’t always take kindly to such criticism, which led Jensen to turn his critique into a systematic study of what they *did* cover. He discovered a morass of fluff, sensationalism, and pap—what used to be called “yellow journalism” in the early 1900s. Jensen called it Junk Food News in 1983. He saw that the public would ultimately pay the price for the major media outlets’ myopic focus and critical omissions in the form of accelerating civic decay. Sadly, he wasn’t wrong.

Today, we are awash in 21st-century versions of junk food news, as produced by corporate media and propagated on social media. Worse, we are also subject to ‘round-the-clock infotainment and propaganda masquerading as journalism, what Jensen’s successor, sociologist Peter Phillips, called News Abuse in the early 2000s (now also referred to as malinformation). Of course, numerous media critics and scholars—including Edward Herman, Noam Chomsky, Ben Bagdikian, Neil Postman, and Robert McChesney—have long warned against rising levels of mis- and disinformation, increased consolidation of media ownership, and their combined toll on press freedom and a well-informed public. In the last decade, with the moral panic around the weaponized epithet of “fake news,” these challenges have spawned a cottage industry of so-called fact-checkers—supposedly objective third parties trying to reverse the troublesome trend of declining public trust in the Fourth Estate. However, most of those efforts have been exposed as Trojan horses for re-establishing corporate media dominance in a digital era of podcasts, TikTok, Instagram reels, and “tweets” (or “posts” as they are now called on X). As *Wall Street Journal* editor-in-chief Emma Tucker bemoaned last year at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, news industry leaders are losing control of the narrative:

“If you go back really not that long ago, as I say, we owned the news. We were the gatekeepers, and we very much owned the facts as well. If it said it in the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, then that was a fact. Nowadays, people can go to all sorts of different sources for the news, and they’re much more questioning about what we’re saying. So, it’s no longer good enough for us just to say, this is what happened, or this is the news. We have to explain—almost like explain our working. So, readers expect to understand how we source stories. They want to know how we go about getting stories. We have to sort of lift the

bonnet, as it were, and in a way that newspapers aren't used to doing and explain to people what we're doing. We need to be much more transparent about how we go about collecting the news."

"Lift the bonnet." "Explain to people what we're doing." It's almost as if the public wants more fact-based, transparently sourced reporting in their news, not partisan propaganda. And, go figure, in a rabidly consumerist culture, they want receipts too. Tucker seems to agree, though the corporate media and their advertisers/investors from Big Pharma, Big Tech, the Military-Industrial Complex, and other powerful institutions whose narratives the public is questioning, likely do not. For Tucker and other gatekeepers, this public scrutiny is inconvenient, perhaps even impertinent, but also a market reality news organizations must now at least pay lip service to addressing. Perhaps *this* is what has contributed to record-low levels of approval and trust of the news media among the public.

Indy Journalism Can Build Public Trust While Fighting Fake News

Media scholars have described this conundrum as an epistemic one, the ushering in of a "post-truth" world "in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief." The mis- and disinformation ecosystem that has emerged in this post-truth climate has establishment institutions from the WEF to Congress and the mass media themselves clutching pearls. Even the American public has come to believe that the lack of trustworthy information is a greater threat than terrorism. With the return of Donald Trump to the presidency, these concerns, along with increasing existential attacks on journalists and the news media itself, including ABC, CBS, NPR/PBS, and even the Associated Press as "enemies of the American people," are growing rapidly and in unprecedented ways.

There certainly are major issues with corporate media and establishment outlets, which we at Project Censored have documented for nearly half a century. However, our critiques are not meant to undermine major media for partisan gain. Instead, the Project's criticisms of corporate news expose systemic gaps and slant in coverage, in order to pressure the nation's most prominent news outlets to use their massive budgets and influence to serve the public good, rather than private interests, by holding corporate and government abusers of power accountable. Given the well-documented limitations of corporate media, we support a robust, independent, and public media system, because a commercial, for-profit model cannot "tell the people what is really going on," as George Seldes once put it. The solution to our present journalistic woes does not lie with industry leaders, biased fact-checkers, or Big Tech content moderators. It rests on critical media literacy and a fiercely independent free press.

In support of this proposed solution, Project Censored advocates for a healthy democracy by promoting news literacy education, especially by providing hands-on training in critical media literacy for students, through our curriculum, student internships, and Campus Affiliates Program, each of which distinguishes Project Censored from other news watch organizations and press freedom groups. Further, each year, Project Censored also recognizes some of the best independent journalists, reporting factually, transparently, and ethically in the public interest, pointing out that these are among the best advocates of news literacy, literally teaching by example. So, ironically, the very solutions to the revitalization of our failing Fourth Estate are its most radical independent practitioners, not their owners/employers or meddling partisan outsiders. History shows this to be the case, and we should listen to what the past can teach us.

“All Governments Lie”

Among the many books Jensen published, one of the most significant might be *Stories That Changed America: Muckrakers of the 20th Century*. In it, he collected exemplary work by nearly two dozen legendary journalists, his selection of the previous century’s most significant truth-tellers, including excerpts from decisive reports by Ida Tarbell (*The History of the Standard Oil Company*), Lincoln Steffans (*The Shame of the Cities*), Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle* and *The Brass Check*), George Seldes (*In Fact*), Edward R. Murrow (*In Search of Light*), and I.F. Stone (*I.F. Stone’s Weekly*). As Jensen wrote, “Their words led to a nationwide public revolt against social evils and [decades] of reforms in antitrust legislation, the electoral process, banking regulations, and a host of other social programs.” The reporting Jensen collected in *Stories That Changed America* continues to inspire those of us who believe journalism can make a difference.

“All governments lie, but disaster lies in wait for countries whose officials smoke the same hashish they give out,” the iconic muckraker “Izzy” Stone once wrote. But Stone had great faith in the power of the press to expose and counter those lies. We need brave, independent journalists and newsrooms to tackle the most controversial and suppressed issues of our era. Stone relentlessly exposed governmental prevarications and injustices throughout his career. He also saw the shortcomings of his own profession, to the point of resigning from the National Press Club in 1941, rather than kowtowing to its racism and political sycophancy. After realizing he had limited influence in the establishment press, he started *I.F. Stone’s Weekly* and dared to report the truth on his own. He took on McCarthyism at a time when his peers were being attacked, arrested, deported, and disappeared. He fought for truth and peace

in the face of the unjust, murderous conflicts of the Cold War, especially in Vietnam. Sound familiar?

Governments lie. Stone's insight is timeless, but it seems more relevant than ever in 2025. The Trump administration and its enablers bombard us daily with lies and half-truths, what Reporters Without Borders has characterized as “a monumental assault on freedom of information.” At best, the *establishment* press seems capable of little more than chronicling the barrage; at worst, they capitulate to it.

The notion of a press “watchdog” on a governmental leash did not begin with the current administration—as Jensen and his students at Sonoma State noted in 1976 looking back on the eve of Richard Nixon's re-election, no major news outlet even *mentioned* the Watergate scandal—and the roots of a subservient press reach back to the earliest history of American journalism on the presidency. But the return of Trump to power is a nadir for many of our cherished freedoms, including those of the First Amendment, which links freedom of speech and press with the rights to assemble and petition—and the public, our democracy, needs journalism that can help us awaken from what historian Timothy Snyder has described as a “self-induced intellectual coma” that is characteristic of “the politics of inevitability.”

The Izzy's Are Coming!

Calling out counter-democratic measures is one way to resist the onslaught of authoritarianism. A free press provides the means for this, but people need to act in response. Rather than complain that “the left” needs a media power like Rupert Murdoch's to “compete,” we should open our eyes and support the amazing people and organizations *doing this invaluable work already*. Project Censored highlights the most important but under-reported independent news stories each year, promoting the work of independent journalists, news outlets, and press freedom organizations that exemplify “media democracy in action.” Their work embodies the very spirit of resistance and amplifies the voices of those trampled by oligarchs and would-be despots.

The Park Center for Independent Media (PCIM) at Ithaca College shares this ethos, supporting independent media as a bulwark against everyday injustices and creeping tyranny. Among the only academic centers of journalism in the United States focused solely on *independent* media, each year, PCIM honors the leading independent journalists of our time with its Izzy Award, named in honor of I.F. “Izzy” Stone. April 30 marks the seventeenth annual award ceremony, which will also be the occasion for numerous muckraking journalists and free press organizations to convene and build coalitions,

strengthen solidarity, and fight to protect our democratic republic from anyone, whether they bat for Team Red or Team Blue, who would subvert it for their own private gain.

The Izzy Award celebrates the practice of radical muckraking journalism in the public interest, and its continuing relevance in our current Gilded Age of Big Tech plutocracy. The work at PCIM and Project Censored reminds us that we cannot wait for change to simply emerge; we must create it ourselves. If past is prologue, we also have much to learn from and pass on to the next generation, whose experiences and voices will inform and express the stories that change America again, to paraphrase Jensen.

Now is not a time for cowering; it is a time to exhibit what political activist and whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg called civil courage, regardless of the odds. Or, as Izzy noted, it is time “to defend the weak against the strong; to fight for justice; and to seek, as best I can to bring healing perspectives to bear on the terrible hates and fears of [humankind], in the hope of someday bringing about one world, in which [people] will enjoy the differences of the human garden instead of killing each other over them.”

Hear, hear. Let’s not get lost in the smoke of the hashish blown in our faces by elite media and government actors. Let’s instead recognize and support the reportorial canaries in the coal mines, from the climate crisis and Kafkaesque raids on the vulnerable among us to the dismantling of education, attacks on the arts, and an ongoing genocide. Let’s act on the information independent journalists share at their own risk, for we ignore them at our own.

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