



PROJECT CENSORED: The Top 25 News Stories of 2015–16

Students and academics, continuing an initiative that began in 1976 at Sonoma State University, California, have compiled their list of the news most underreported by the US corporate media.

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1. US Military Forces Deployed in 70 Per Cent of World's Nations

If you throw a dart at a world map and do not hit water, Nick Turse reported for TomDispatch, the odds are that US Special Operations Forces (SOF) "have been there sometime in 2015". According to a spokesperson for the Special Operations Command (SOCOM), in 2015 SOFs were deployed in 147 of the world's 195 recognised nations, an increase of 80 per cent since 2010.

As General Joseph Votel, SOCOM Commander, told the audience of the Aspen Security Forum in July 2015, more SOF troops are deployed to more locations and are conducting more operations than at the height of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. In Turse's words: "Everyday, in around 80 or more countries that Special Operations Command will not name, they undertake missions the command refuses to talk about."

Calculated in 2014 constant dollars, the SOCOM budget has more than tripled since 2001, when funding totalled US\$3 billion. By 2015, SOCOM funding had risen to nearly \$10 billion. That figure, Turse noted, did not include additional funding from specific military branches, which SOCOM estimated to amount to another \$8 billion annually.

Africa has seen the greatest increase in SOCOM deployments since 2006. In *The Intercept* in October 2015, Turse commented on the development by US forces of the Chabelley Airfield in the East African nation of Djibouti: "Unbeknownst to most Americans and without any apparent public announcement, the US has recently taken steps to transform this tiny, out-of-the-way outpost into an 'enduring' base, a key hub for its secret war, run by the US military's Joint Special Operations Command..., in Africa and the Middle East." Chabelley,



Aerial images show the secret US drone base in Djibouti, Africa.

(Photos: Google Earth; composite: TheIntercept.com, <http://tinyurl.com/pwqors7>)

he noted, has become "essential" to secret US drone operations over Yemen, southwestern Saudi Arabia, Somalia and parts of Ethiopia and southern Egypt. As Turse summed up: "The startling transformation of this little-known garrison in this little-known country is in line with US military activity in Africa, where, largely under the radar, the number of missions, special operations deployments, and outposts has grown rapidly and with little outside scrutiny."

Corporate media have not covered the massive expansion of Special Operations Forces around the globe, much less raised critical questions about whether these missions result in meaningful accomplishments.

2. Crisis in Evidence-Based Medicine

In April 2015, *The Lancet's* editor, Richard Horton, wrote that "something has gone fundamentally wrong with one of our greatest human creations". Describing the upshot of a UK symposium held that month on the reproducibility and reliability of biomedical research, Horton summarised the "case against science": "[M]uch of the scientific literature, perhaps half, may simply be untrue. Afflicted by studies with small sample sizes, tiny effects, invalid exploratory analyses, and flagrant conflicts of interest, together with an obsession for pursuing fashionable trends of dubious importance, science has taken a turn towards darkness... The apparent endemicity of bad research behaviour is alarming."

Horton is not the first editor of a prominent medical journal to raise these concerns. In January 2009, Marcia Angell made comparable claims in an article for *The New York Review of Books*: "It is simply no longer possible to believe much of the clinical research that is published, or to rely on the judgment of trusted physicians or authoritative medical guidelines. I take no pleasure in this conclusion, which I reached slowly and reluctantly over my two decades as an editor of *The New England Journal of Medicine*."

No biomedical study better epitomises the corruption and conflicts of interest noted by insider critics like Horton and Angell than Study 329, a now notorious clinical trial published in July 2001 in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. The study's authors reported that paroxetine—marketed since 1992 by SmithKline Beecham and, after a 2000 merger, by GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) as Paxil® in the US and Seroxat® in the UK—was safe and effective for treating depressed children and

adolescents. A GSK marketing campaign built on the published study, touting the drug's "remarkable efficacy and safety", led to doctors prescribing Paxil to over two million US children and adolescents by the end of 2002.

However, within a year of the report's publication, the US Food and Drug Administration declared Study 329 a "failed trial" because further evidence indicated that adolescents prescribed the drug to treat depression fared no better than those on a placebo. In 2003, UK drug regulators instructed doctors not to prescribe Seroxat to adolescents. In 2012, in what the US Department of Justice described as the "largest health care fraud settlement in US history", GSK paid a \$3 billion fine to resolve its liability over fraud allegations and failure to report safety data.

In September 2015, *The BMJ* published a major reanalysis of the GSK-funded Study 329. Charlie Cooper of the *Independent* explained that the reanalysis—conducted by an international team of researchers from Australia, Canada, the US and the UK, and based on thousands of pages of newly available GSK data—"starkly" contradicted the original report's claims. Furthermore, Cooper noted, the reassessment marked "a milestone in the medical community's campaign to open up clinical trial data held by pharmaceutical companies to independent scientific scrutiny".

As Sarah Boseley wrote for the *Guardian*, the reanalysis of Study 329 found that paroxetine's beneficial effects were far less and its harmful effects far greater than the original study reported. In particular, by examining the full set of clinical trials data, the researchers who conducted the reassessment found that 11 of the 275 children and adolescents on the drug developed suicidal or self-harming behaviour. The original study had acknowledged only five of these cases. David Healy, a psychiatry professor and one of the reassessment's co-authors, observed: "This is a very high rate of kids going on to become suicidal. It doesn't take expertise to find this. It takes extraordinary expertise to avoid finding it."

Boseley's report also documented renewed calls for the *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* to retract the original GSK-supported study, whose lead author was Martin Keller of Brown University. Neither the journal's editors nor any of the paper's 22 listed authors has intervened to correct the record. According to Cooper, the original report was written by "a medical writer hired by the drug company".

In May 2014, President Obama signed the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act into law. Although it requires federal agencies to make data—including funding sources for clinical trials—publicly available, the Act's requirements do not apply to privately funded biomedical research.

3. Rising Carbon Dioxide Levels Threaten to Permanently Disrupt Vital Ocean Bacteria

Imagine a car heading towards a cliff's edge with its accelerator pedal stuck to the floor. That, Robert Perkins wrote in USC News, is a metaphor for "what climate change will do to the key group of ocean bacteria known as *Trichodesmium*", according to a study published in the September 2015 issue of *Nature Communications* by researchers at the University of Southern California and the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution.

Trichodesmium is found in nutrient-poor parts of the ocean, where it converts nitrogen gas into material that can be used by other forms of life. From algae to whales, all life needs nitrogen to grow. Reporting for the *Guardian*, Emma Howard quoted Eric Webb, one of the study's researchers, who explained how the process of "nitrogen fixation" makes *Trichodesmium* "the fertilising agent of the open ocean".

The study tested the effects of elevated levels of carbon dioxide by subjecting hundreds of generations of *Trichodesmium* bred over a five-year period to CO₂ levels predicted for the year 2100 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Responding to increased ocean acidification, the bacteria went into "reproductive overdrive", evolving to grow faster and to produce 50 per cent more nitrogen. One consequence of this is that *Trichodesmium* could consume significant quantities of nutrients, such as iron and phosphorus, that are in limited supply in the ocean, leaving other organisms that depend on the same nutrients without enough to survive. Alternatively, *Trichodesmium* might consume nutrients at a rate that would lead to its own extinction, leaving other organisms without the nitrogen that the bacteria make available. Either way, the effects of elevated CO₂ levels on the bacteria could trigger catastrophic effects up the marine food chain.

Most significantly, the researchers found that even when the bacteria were returned to lower, present-day levels of carbon dioxide, *Trichodesmium* remained "stuck in the fast lane", a finding described as "unprecedented" in evolutionary biology.

4. Search Engine Algorithms and Electronic Voting Machines Could Swing 2016 Election

From search engine algorithms to electronic voting machines, technology provides opportunities for manipulation of voters and their votes in ways that could profoundly affect the results of the 2016 US elections. The 2012 presidential election was won by a margin of just 3.9 per cent; and, historically, half of US presidential elections have been won by margins under 7.6 per cent. These narrow but consequential victory margins underscore the importance of understanding how secret, proprietary technologies—whether they are newly developed or increasingly outdated—potentially swing election results.



Mark Frary, in the December 2015 edition of *Index on Censorship*, described the latest research by Robert Epstein and Ronald E. Robertson of the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology on what they call the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME). Their research focuses on the powerful role played by the secret algorithms (including Google's PageRank and Facebook's EdgeRank) that determine the contents of our Internet search results and social media news feeds.

"The results were shocking," Frary reported. Epstein and Robertson showed that biased search rankings "could shift the voting preferences of undecided voters by 20% or more". The effect could be greater than 20 per cent in some demographic groups, and—perhaps most significantly—this search-ranking bias "could be masked so that people show no awareness of the manipulation".

In an August 2015 article for *Politico*, Epstein wrote that the SEME "turns out to be one of the largest behavioral effects ever discovered". He and Robertson believe that "SEME is a serious threat to the democratic system of government".

Hidden algorithms shape online content in significantly different ways from more widely recognised concerns about editorial censorship on television and in print. Frary observed that on TV and in print, "there is a person at the heart of the decision process". He added: "We

can imagine how commissioning editors think, but the algorithms behind Facebook and Google are opaque."

This concern had led Emily Bell, a journalism professor at Columbia University, to declare in a November 2014 lecture: "If there is a free press, journalists are no longer in charge of it. Engineers who rarely think about journalism or cultural impact or democratic responsibility are making decisions every day that shape how news is created and disseminated."

When filtering is financially motivated, secret and beyond our control, "we should be extremely concerned", as Epstein told *Index on Censorship*. Online filtering on massive platforms such as Google and Facebook, he warned, is "rapidly becoming the most powerful form of mind control that has ever existed".

As Frary reported, Facebook, Google and others are "highly secretive about how their algorithms work".

Electronic voting machines present similar challenges, as Bob Fittrakis and Harvey Wasserman document in their book *The Strip & Flip Selection of 2016: Five Jim Crows & Electronic Election Theft*. "The electronic voting machines are owned by private corporations... And the courts have ruled that the source code on these electronic voting machines is proprietary," Wasserman told Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! in February 2016.

5. Corporate Exploitation of Global Refugee Crisis Masked as Humanitarianism

According to a June 2015 United Nations report, 60 million people worldwide are now refugees due to conflict in their home nations. The UN report indicated that during 2014, one out of every 122 people was a refugee, internally displaced or an asylum seeker, and over half of these refugees were children. While Syrian refugees accounted for the largest number (an estimated 11.5 million people), large refugee populations in other places such as Colombia, parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia remain largely unreported.

According to António Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees at the time of the report: "We are witnessing a paradigm change, an unchecked slide into an era in which the scale of global forced displacement as well as the response required is now clearly dwarfing anything seen before."

Although the extent of the global refugee crisis has been covered in the corporate media (for example, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*), the exploitation of refugees has been less well reported and often subject to distorted pro-business coverage.

Writing in February 2016 on AlterNet, Sarah Lazare warned of the World Bank's private enterprise solution to the Syrian displacement crisis. "Under the guise of humanitarian aid," Lazare wrote, "the World Bank is enticing Western companies to launch 'new investments' in Jordan in order to profit from the labor of stranded

Syrian refugees. In a country where migrant workers have faced forced servitude, torture and wage theft, there is reason to be concerned that this capital-intensive 'solution' to the mounting crisis of displacement will establish sweatshops that specifically target war refugees for hyper-exploitation."

A September 2015 *Wall Street Journal* article, which reported on the number of small businesses and large corporations that are finding ways to profit from the flood of migrants, dealt only with Syrians who had managed to migrate to European countries.

6. Over 1.5 Million American Families Live on Two Dollars Per Person Per Day

According to Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, sociologists and authors of the book *\$2.00 A Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, in 2011 more than 1.5 million US families—including three million children—lived on as little as \$2.00 per person per day in any given month. Edin and Shaefer determined this figure on the basis of data from the US Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation, income data from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, additional data on family homelessness, and their own fieldwork in four study sites including Chicago, Cleveland and communities in Appalachia and the Mississippi Delta.

As Marcus Harrison Green wrote in *Yes! Magazine* in September 2015, the authors' depiction of what poverty truly looks like in the US reads "like a Dickens novel". He noted that the US media often neglect the experiences of the poor, making the study's findings "startling for many". From families who depend on their mother making plasma donations twice a week for their income to others with nothing but a carton of spoiled milk in their refrigerator, Edin and Shaefer documented family households living "from crisis to crisis". One informant told Shaefer that she had been beaten and raped and was always "looking out for the next threat".

Edin and Shaefer found that since 1996 the number of families living on less than \$2.00 per person per day has more than doubled.

7. No End in Sight for Fukushima Disaster

Nearly five years after the 9.0 earthquake and tsunami that destroyed the nuclear power plant at Fukushima, as Dahr Jamail reported for Truthout in January 2016, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) officials in charge of the plant continue to release large quantities of radioactive waste water into the Pacific Ocean.

Arnold Gundersen, a former nuclear industry senior vice president, called the Fukushima disaster "the biggest industrial catastrophe in the history of mankind". Jamail wrote that experts such as Gundersen continue to warn officials and the public that this problem is not going away. As Gundersen told Jamail: "With Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, and now with Fukushima, you



On the third anniversary of the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima, Greens–European Free Alliance MEPs carried out a symbolic action at the European Parliament in Strasbourg to remember the disaster and its victims. (Photo: Greensefa, Flickr.com)

can pinpoint the exact day and time they started...but they never end."

Although the Fukushima plant has been offline since the disaster, uncontrolled fission continues to generate heat and require cooling. The cooling process has produced "hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of tons of highly radioactive water", Jamail wrote. TEPCO has no backup safety systems or proactive plan for dealing with the accumulation of contaminated water, so much of it is released into the Pacific Ocean.

Drawing on reports from the *Asahi Shimbun* and Agence France-Presse, Common Dreams remarked that on 14 September 2015 "[d]espite the objections of environmentalists and after overcoming local opposition from fishermen, the Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) pumped more than 850 tons of groundwater from below the Fukushima nuclear power plant into the Pacific Ocean". Each day, according to these reports, TEPCO was pumping approximately 300 tons of groundwater to the surface for treatment before placing it in storage. Officially no water is released into the ocean until it is tested for radioactive content, but many experts are sceptical of this claim. Jamail noted: "The company has repeatedly come under fire for periodically dumping large amounts of radioactive water in the Pacific Ocean."

Helen Caldicott, physician, antinuclear advocate and author, told Truthout: "There is no way to prevent radioactive water [from] reaching the western shores of the North American continent and then circulating around the rest of the Pacific Ocean... At the moment,

it seems like this is going to occur for the rest of time." Radioactive water affects ocean life through a process described by Caldicott as "biological magnification". The effect of radiation expands each step up the food chain—from algae to crustaceans and small fish, up to the ocean's largest creatures.

Celine-Marie Pascale of The American University conducted a content analysis of more than 2,100 articles, editorials and letters to the editor on Fukushima, published by the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, Politico and the Huffington Post between 11 March 2011 and 11 March 2013. Pascale found that just six per cent of the articles referred to risk to the general public. "This in itself," according to her March 2016 paper, "is a significant finding about the focus of news media during one of the largest nuclear disasters in history."

8. Syria's War Spurred by Contest for Gas Delivery to Europe, Not Muslim Sectarianism

At least four years into the crisis in Syria, "most people have no idea how this war even got started", reported Mnar Muhawesh of MintPress News in September 2015.

In 2011–12, after Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, refused to cooperate with Turkey in its proposal to create a natural gas pipeline between Qatar and Turkey through Syria, Turkey and its allies became "the major architects of Syria's 'civil war'". The proposed pipeline would have bypassed Russia to reach European markets currently dominated by Russian gas giant Gazprom. As a result, according to Muhawesh: "[T]he Middle East is being torn to shreds by manipulative plans to gain oil and gas access by pitting people against one another based on religion. The ensuing chaos provides ample cover to install a new regime that's more amenable to opening up oil pipelines and ensuring favorable routes for the highest bidders."

In 2012, the US, the UK, France, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, along with Turkey, began to organise, arm and finance rebels to form the Free Syrian Army, consistent with long-standing US plans to destabilise Syria. These nations formed a pact, The Group of Friends of the Syrian People, that implemented a sectarian divide-and-conquer strategy to overthrow President Assad. Muhawesh wrote of the timing: "This coalition and meddling in Syria came about immediately on the heels of discussions of an Iran–Iraq–Syria gas pipeline that was to be built between 2014 and 2016 from Iran's giant South Pars field through Iraq and Syria. With a possible extension to Lebanon, it would eventually reach Europe, the target export market."

As Muhawesh noted, access to oil and gas—not sectarian differences—is the underlying cause of the violent conflict and humanitarian disaster in Syria. The war is being "sold to the public as a Sunni–Shiite conflict" by the Friends of Syria because "most people would not support any covert funding and arming of rebels or direct intervention".

Based on secret US cables revealed by WikiLeaks, Muhawesh commented: "Foreign meddling in Syria began several years before the Syrian revolt erupted." US Department of State cables from 2006 documented plans to instigate civil strife that would lead to the overthrow of Assad's government. The leaks revealed US partnering with nations like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Egypt to fuel Sunni-Shiite sectarianism in dividing Syria.

Although there is plenty of coverage in US corporate media about the violence in Syria and the refugee crisis that is sweeping Europe and reaching North America, this has failed to address the economic interests, including control of potentially lucrative gas pipelines, that motivate the US and its allies. Instead, corporate news coverage has characterised the conflict in Syria as a battle for democracy that has been hijacked by Sunni-Shiite interests. Much of what passes for news coverage in the corporate press adheres to a pattern that Muhawesh identified and critiqued as simplistic and "Orientalist", framing conflict in the Middle East and especially Syria as sectarian in order to "paint the region and its people as barbaric".



9. Big Pharma Political Lobbying Not Limited to Presidential Campaigns

Pharmaceutical companies have been among the biggest political spenders for years, according to data from the Center for Responsive Politics. As Mike Ludwig reported for Truthout in September 2015, large pharmaceutical companies made over \$51 million in campaign donations during the 2012 US federal elections and nearly \$32 million in the 2014 elections. As of September 2015, they had already put \$10 million into the 2016 elections. During the 2014 elections, industry giant Pfizer led drug companies with \$1.5 million in federal campaign donations, followed by Amgen with \$1.3 million and McKesson Corporation with \$1.1 million.

Although these are considerable sums of money, large pharmaceutical companies' campaign donations pale in comparison to their spending on lobbying politicians and influencing policies outside of elections. As Ludwig noted, data gathered on the 2014 elections showed that

the industry spent \$7 on lobbying for every dollar spent on campaign contributions.

According to records from MapLight's lobbying database, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) has been the drug companies' lead lobbying group. Since 2008, PhRMA has spent nearly \$174 million on lobbying, making it the fifth-largest lobbying spender in the nation, outspending powerful defence contractors (e.g., Boeing and Northrop Grumman), the oil and gas industry (e.g., ExxonMobil) and Koch Industries, among others. Pfizer is one of the nation's top 25 lobbying spenders, having outlaid over \$106 million since 2008, with \$9.4 million of that in 2015 alone.

As Ludwig wrote, the pharmaceutical industry includes some of the most profitable companies in the world, and the industry has "a clear interest in maintaining the political status quo". While representatives of the industry assure the public that profits go to the research and development of new drugs, a closer examination of Big Pharma expenditure on political contributions and, especially, lobbying reveals that it spends hundreds of millions of dollars each year to influence US politics, health care policy and international trade.

10. CISA: The Internet Surveillance Act that No One is Discussing

On 18 December 2015, President Obama signed the Cybersecurity Information Sharing Act (CISA) into law as part of a 2,000-page "omnibus" spending bill. As drafted, CISA is intended to "improve cybersecurity in the United States through enhanced sharing of information about cybersecurity threats, and for other purposes". The Act authorises the creation of a system for corporate informants to provide customers' data to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which in turn would share this information with other federal agencies such as the departments of Commerce, Defense (which includes the National Security Agency), Energy, Justice (which includes the Federal Bureau of Investigation) and the Treasury (which oversees the Internal Revenue Service) as well as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

As Andy Greenberg reported for *Wired* in December, the final Senate version of the bill removed personal information protections that privacy advocates had fought successfully to have included in a previous version. He noted that CISA had "alarmed the privacy community" by providing a loophole in privacy laws that would enable intelligence and law enforcement officials to engage in surveillance without warrants. The version of CISA approved in the Senate by a vote of 74 to 21 in October 2015, Greenberg wrote, "creates the ability for the president to set up 'portals' for agencies like the FBI and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, so that companies hand information directly to law

enforcement and intelligence agencies instead of to the Department of Homeland Security".

Greenberg added that tech firms—including Apple, Twitter and Reddit—as well as 55 civil liberties groups and security experts had opposed the bill, and that in July 2015 the DHS itself had warned that the bill would "sweep away privacy protections" while inundating the agency with data of "dubious value".

11. CIA Warned Bush Administration of Terrorist Attack Prior to 9/11

Based on new interviews with Cofer Black, a former Director of the Counterterrorism Center of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and George Tenet, a former Director of the CIA, Chris Whipple reported in Politico in November 2015 that the George W. Bush administration had ignored CIA warnings in the months before 9/11. Noting that neither Tenet nor Black had spoken about the warnings "in such detail until now—or been so emphatic about how specific and pressing their warnings really were", Whipple wrote that, starting in spring 2001, "the CIA had "repeatedly and urgently" warned the White House that an attack was imminent.

In spring 2001, Tenet and Black proposed to Bush administration officials a plan aimed at ending the threat of al-Qaeda. Known as "the Blue Sky paper", the plan called for covert CIA and military operations against al-Qaeda: "getting into the Afghan sanctuary, launching a paramilitary operation, creating a bridge with Uzbekistan". Tenet told Whipple that the White House responded: "We're not quite ready to consider this. We don't want to start the clock ticking." Whipple interpreted Tenet's account to imply that the White House, in Whipple's words, "did not want a paper trail to show that they'd been warned". According to Black, Bush's staff was "mentally stuck" in an outdated conception of terrorism. They were "used to terrorists being Euro-lefties", Black told Whipple, making it "very difficult" to communicate the urgency of the CIA's warnings regarding al-Qaeda.

12. Why Our Lives Depend on Keeping 80 Per Cent of Fossil Fuels in the Ground

The Spring 2016 issue of *Yes! Magazine* featured articles on the theme "Life After Oil". Bill McKibben, the founder of 350.org, wrote that when it comes to climate change the essential problem is not "industry versus environmentalists or Republicans against Democrats". It's a case of "people against physics". For that reason, the compromises and trade-offs typical of most public policy debates will not work because "[l]obbying physics is useless; it just keeps doing what it does".

McKibben reported that we "have to keep 80 percent of the fossil fuel reserves that we know about underground"—the aim of the Keep It In The Ground movement that began five years ago.

At that time, McKibben remarked, environmentalists engaged in climate policy focused on reducing demand. Such an approach has been making "slow but steady progress". So the Keep It In The Ground movement has focused on the supply side of climate policy. The world's remaining concentrations of fossil fuels can be understood as "money pits"—untapped coal, gas and oil that could be worth \$20 trillion—or as "carbon bombs", which will wreck the planet if they are used. For this reason, Keep It In The Ground has opposed the Keystone Pipeline System in Canada and the US and what would have been the world's largest coal mine in Queensland, Australia, while advocating for colleges and universities, doctors' associations and churches from around the world to divest from fossil fuels.

Blocking pipelines, McKibben commented, cuts the fuse on the carbon bomb, while divestment campaigns have "driven the necessity of keeping carbon underground from the fringes into the heart of the world's establishment". With alternatives to fossil fuel becoming increasingly less expensive, "we don't need to win this fight forever", he noted. Instead, if we can hold off fossil fuel development for "just a few more years—then we'll have made the transition to clean energy irreversible".



13. US "Vaccine Court" Has Paid over Three Billion Dollars to Vaccine-Injured Families

Since 1988, the US government has paid \$3.2 billion to 4,150 individuals and families for injuries and deaths attributed to shots for flu, diphtheria, whooping cough and other conditions. Though vaccines "remain one of the greatest success stories in public health", Tracy Seipel wrote for the *Marin Independent Journal* in August 2015, "for some Americans, rare side effects of inoculations have led to hardship, serious injury, even death".

As Anders Kelto reported on NPR's *All Things Considered* in June 2015, high-profile lawsuits against drug companies in the 1980s successfully charged that children immunised with the diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus (DPT) vaccine experienced adverse reactions, including seizures and brain damage, leading to at least two court settlements worth millions of dollars. In response, drug

companies threatened to stop producing vaccines for the US market because litigation risks were too great unless the government provided them with "no-fault" protection. NPR quoted Anna Kirkland, an associate professor of women's studies and political science at the University of Michigan: "There was a real fear that some of our childhood vaccines would no longer be available."

In 1986, that fear led Congress to establish the little-known Office of Special Masters of the US Court of Federal Claims (known informally as the "vaccine court") and the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program. NPR reported that the court "administers a no-fault compensation program that serves as an alternative to the traditional US tort system". As Kirkland explained, the vaccine court serves to "shield the vaccine makers from liability". It also created a fund to compensate injured vaccine recipients, through a 75-cent surcharge on every vaccine dose.

According to the NPR report: "Petitioners don't have to prove that the immunization caused their condition—the court operates under a presumption of causation if the injury develops within a certain period of time." To win a claim, petitioners must provide proof of developing a condition listed in the vaccine injury table. Settlements for conditions not included in the table require "a higher burden of proof". But, as Seipel clarified, a petition has to be filed "within three years of the first symptom of the injury, within two years of the death, or within four years after the first symptom of the vaccine-related injury from which the death resulted".

However, most people simply do not know about the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, and they may not learn about it in time to petition. And in cases where parents allege that a vaccine has injured their child, the full extent of the injury may not be known until the child is older.

Jessica Boehm's May 2015 report for Cronkite News indicated that annual revenues of the Vaccine Injury Compensation Trust Fund significantly exceed the amount spent on injury claims through the compensation program. According to Government Accountability Office figures, since 2005 the vaccine court has compensated an average of 190 of the 466 claims it receives each year. During that time, the program's annual operational spend has averaged \$148.7 million. Meanwhile, the balance of the trust fund "has climbed past \$3.5 billion".

14. FBI's New Plan to Spy on High School Students

Under new guidelines issued in January 2016, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is instructing high schools across the US to report students who criticise government policies and "western corruption" as potential future terrorists, Sarah Lazare wrote for AlterNet in March. The new guidelines also warn that young



people who are poor, are immigrants or talk about travel to "suspicious" countries are more likely to commit violence. As Lazare reported, the FBI's "Preventing Violent Extremism in Schools" guidelines combine "McCarthy-era theories of radicalization"—in which authorities monitor thoughts and behaviours suspected of leading to acts of violent subversion—with elements of a "widely unpopular" and "deeply controversial" British surveillance program, known as Prevent, that monitors Muslim communities and individuals.

The new guidelines depict US high schools as "hotbeds of extremism", Lazare summarised. Claiming that youth "possess inherent risk factors", the FBI guidelines describe high school students as "ideal targets" for recruitment by violent extremists. Educational materials prepared by the FBI for schools indicate that activities ranging from using "unusual language" or "private messaging apps" and encryption ("going dark", in FBI-speak) to playing online games outside of school could indicate that "someone plans to commit violence".

In calling for schools to create "threat assessment teams" and "enhance domain awareness", the FBI is engaging in what Danielle Jefferis of the American Civil Liberties Union's National Security Project, writing for Just Security in March 2016, characterised as "fear mongering", which will "almost assuredly ratchet up the pressure on school officials to go to law enforcement before seeking out alternatives".

15. Climate Change and Gender Inequality

We need to understand climate change through the lens of gender equality, Georgie Johnson reported for Greenpeace's Energydesk in March 2016. As Johnson's research showed, climate change has different impacts on men and women based on pre-existing social and economic inequalities.

Because most international efforts to address climate change do not include women, the resulting policies do not take into account the particular challenges that

climate change poses for women and girls. This is ironic because, according to a 2014 European Union study, women are more likely than men to be concerned about climate change and make sacrifices to reduce emissions.

16. Over Three-Quarters of Freedom of Information Act Requests Not Fully Answered

On his election, President Obama promised greater governmental transparency to the American people. In practice, the Obama administration has set a record for failures to find and produce government documents in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

As Ted Bridis and Jack Gillum reported for Associated Press's *The Big Story* in March 2016, government searchers had come up "empty-handed" in more than one in every six cases, or 129,825 times, during the 2015 fiscal year. Bridis and Gillum wrote: "People who asked for records under the law received censored files or nothing in 77 percent of requests, also a record." The 77 per cent figure represents a 12 per cent increase compared with the first full year after President Obama's election.

Signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1966, the Freedom of Information Act encourages and enforces government disclosures to citizens and foreigners who request federal records, with exemptions for material that would threaten national security, violate personal privacy or expose confidential decision-making in certain areas.

Censorship and refusal to disclose are only two parts of a three-piece puzzle, the last being human error. As Bridis and Gillum revealed, federal workers and the procedures they use to retrieve requested files also contribute to the problem. Though federal employees are required by law to make a reasonable search for requested records, the means of doing so are left to their discretion.

17. Deadly Medical Neglect for Immigrants in Privatised US Prisons

Over 100 inmates in privatised, immigrant-only prisons in the US have died, many in disturbing circumstances involving negligent medical and mental health care, Seth Freed Wessler disclosed in *The Nation* in January 2016. His article documented the deadly consequences of medical neglect in 11 immigrant-only prisons, known as Criminal Alien Requirement facilities. From 1998 to 2014, at least 137 inmates died in these special facilities run by the Corrections Corporation of America, the GEO Group and the Management & Training Corporation under contract with the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP).

Wessler's report is based on more than 9,000 pages of medical records for 103 of the inmates who died in custody since the BOP first opened contract facilities. Wessler fought for over two years to obtain these files, using FOIA requests and ultimately a federal lawsuit to compel the BOP to release the records.

The Nation convened a panel of 23 independent reviewers, including 17 medical doctors and six psychiatrists, to review the files. Of 77 case files adequate for rendering a judgement, in 25 of these cases multiple reviewers found evidence of inadequate care that likely contributed to an inmate's premature death. In just 39 cases did the reviewers find that care had likely been in accordance with recognised medical standards.

Unlike prisons that are run directly by the federal government—including immigration detention centres, where federal authorities typically hold immigrants pending deportation—these private, for-profit institutions are not held to the same standards.



18. Women's Movements Offer Global Paradigm Shift towards Social Justice

From LGBTQ movements and indigenous farming struggles to Black Lives Matter and efforts to create sustainable development, women around the world are leading the way towards greater social justice.

In *Yes! Magazine* in March 2016, Rucha Chitnis wrote: "In the face of growing corporate power, land grabs, economic injustice, and climate change, women's movements offer a paradigm shift. They have redefined leadership and development models, connected the dots between issues and oppression, prioritized collective power and movement-building, and critically examined how issues of gender, race, caste, class, sexuality, and ability disproportionately exclude and marginalize."

In her report, Chitnis gave numerous examples of such developments. One is the National Domestic Workers Alliance, which stood in solidarity with the women of Ferguson, Missouri, in opposition to police brutality in that city.

Chitnis summarised: "Whether it is indigenous women in the Amazon fighting corporate polluters and climate change or undocumented Latina domestic workers advocating for worker rights and dignity in California, women's groups and networks are making links between unbridled capitalism, violence, and the erosion of human rights and destruction of the Earth."

19. Global Epidemic of Electronic Waste

Consumers in the US generate an estimated 3.14 million tons of electronic waste (e-waste) annually, according to the US Environmental Protection Agency, and about 40 per cent of this—50,000 dump-truck loads a year—goes to be recycled. A 2016 study by the Basel Action Network (BAN), a nonprofit group that aims to end the global trade in toxic electronic waste, found that nearly one-third of this waste is exported to developing countries where the low-tech dismantling of the recycled equipment contaminates the environment and endangers workers, many of whom are children.



From July 2014 to December 2015, BAN installed GPS tracking devices in 200 used, nonfunctional pieces of technology, delivered the equipment to publicly accessible e-waste recycling drop-off sites around the US and then followed what happened. As of May 2016, BAN found that 65 (~32 per cent) of the items with tracking devices passed through US recyclers and were exported overseas. BAN estimated that 62 (31 per cent) of the tracked items were likely to be illegal shipments, based on laws in the places where the e-waste ended up.

BAN partnered with Carlo Ratti of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Senseable City Lab to determine exactly where the equipment went. Ratti told the PBS *NewsHour* that he and his fellow researchers were surprised by how far the e-waste had travelled. Global e-waste flows "actually almost cover the whole planet". Each recycled device in the BAN study travelled an average of 2,500 miles (over 4,000 kilometres). Most equipment went to Hong Kong, but BAN tracked devices to 10 different countries including China, Taiwan, Pakistan, Mexico, Thailand, Cambodia and Kenya.

If improperly disposed, e-waste can release a variety of toxins including lead, mercury and cadmium into the environment. However, the US only restricts e-waste exports of one type of component: cathode ray tubes. Though many US states prohibit dumping used electronics in landfills and have e-waste recycling programs, no federal law regulates e-waste recycling.

Since 1989, 182 national governments and the European Union have signed the Basel Convention, an international treaty to stop developed countries from dumping hazardous waste in less-developed nations. As noted by EarthFix in May 2016, the US is the world's only industrialised country that has not ratified the treaty.

20. The Walmarting of American Education

In January 2016, Walmart publicised a plan to close 269 of its retail stores. As Jeff Bryant reported for AlterNet in March, the announcement was significant news in small towns and suburban communities directly affected by the closures but otherwise it did not garner prominent media attention.

Also in January, the Walton Family Foundation (WFF) revealed a five-year strategic plan to spend \$1.0 billion to support and expand charter schools in 13 US cities and states. As *Education Week* commented, the WFF is "doubling down on its investments in school choice". Over the past 20 years, the WFF has given over \$1.3 billion to K–12 education, according to its own calculations. The Walton Family Foundation boasts that one in four charter schools across the nation has received WFF start-up funds.

21. Little Guantánamos: Secretive "Communication Management Units" in the US

In March 2016, inmates from two highly secretive US prisons, known as Communication Management Units (CMUs), appealed a previous summary judgement for the government in their case against the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In March 2015, the US District Court for the District of Columbia had ruled against the prisoners, asserting that CMUs did not violate inmates' rights because restrictions were "limited in nature" compared to ordinary prison units and far better than solitary confinement. In the appeal, attorneys for the Center for Constitutional Rights argued that CMUs represent a "fundamental disruption" to prisoners' rights and freedoms. CMUs have strict regulations against outside communication. Prisoners are isolated from the rest of the prison population and are limited to four hours of visits per month (with no direct contact permitted) and three phone calls per month (for a total of 45 minutes), which must be carried out in English.

In January 2015, the Federal Bureau of Prisons had finalised rules regarding who can be sent to CMUs and how the facilities should operate. But, as Christie Thompson of The Marshall Project explained, "prisoner advocates claim the new rules impose even stricter limits on contact without providing a legitimate way for inmates to appeal being placed under such restrictions".

About 178 inmates are held in the CMUs. Nearly 60 per cent of them are Muslim, and many of the others are animal rights and environmental activists. Journalist Will Potter, who has visited a CMU, told *The Real News*

Network in October 2015 that CMUs are effectively "political prisons for political prisoners".

22. Department of Education Cooperates with ALEC to Privatise Education

The Department of Education (DOE) and school districts throughout the US are working with billionaire families such as the Waltons and Netflix CEO Reed Hastings to undermine public education, Dustin Beilke reported for PRWatch in January 2016.

Instead of defending public education in pursuit of equity for all students, the DOE is working with organisations like the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)—an alliance of corporate lobbyists and state legislators—as well as local chambers of commerce to encourage the conversion of public institutions into private charter schools.

A December 2015 DOE presentation showed that since its inception in 1995, the Charter Schools Program had spent \$3.3 billion of taxpayer money to boost charter schools, supporting an uncritical assessment of how effective charter schools actually are.

According to the Center for Media and Democracy (CMD), although many charter schools have failed and closed in the last 20 years, the DOE continues to provide significant funding to promote them. An October 2015 CMD investigation, "Charter School Black Hole", uncovered how much the federal government has invested in charter schools, as well as the DOE's ties to ALEC. Overall, the DOE overview suggested it functions as a "propagandist for charter schools", Beilke wrote.

23. Modern-Day Child Slavery: Sex Trafficking of Underage Girls in the US

In December 2015, D. Parvaz's seven-part investigative report, "Selling American Girls", for Al Jazeera America, documented sex trafficking in the United States. Each part of her report examined a different role in the sex trafficking trade and its enforcement, from the prostitutes and their buyers, pimps and advocates to law enforcement officers and judges.

Sex trafficking in the US is pervasive. According to the Department of Justice, human trafficking is the second-fastest-growing criminal enterprise after drug trafficking, with minors constituting roughly half the victims. In 2015, over 4,100 of the 5,544 trafficking cases reported to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center's hotline involved sex trafficking. A 2014 Urban Institute study found that the underground commercial sex economy in the US produced multimillion-dollar profits. The report's researchers studied eight major US cities—Atlanta, Dallas, Denver, Kansas City, Miami, Seattle, San Diego and Washington, DC—to estimate that, in each city, the underground sex economy was worth between \$39.9 and \$290 million in 2007.

Many pimps look for children who come from unstable

family backgrounds or destitute neighbourhoods. According to FAIR Girls, an anti-trafficking organisation, 70–75 per cent of the girls they assisted had histories with foster care systems.

While safe harbour laws, which criminalise adults who purchase sex with minors, have been passed in 34 states, according to the Polaris project these laws tend to vary widely from state to state, leaving many girls treated as criminals rather than as victims.

In a case initiated by the US in 2013, the WTO found that India's solar initiative, which requires that 10 per cent of solar cells be produced locally, violated international trade laws.

24. India's Solar Plans Blocked by US Interests and World Trade Organization

The United Nations Climate Change Conference, held in December 2015 in Paris, featured lofty rhetoric about international cooperation to tackle climate change.

However, in February 2016, the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruled against India's Jawaharlal Nehru National Solar Mission. In a case initiated by the US in 2013, the WTO found that India's solar initiative, which requires that 10 per cent of solar cells be produced locally, violated international trade laws. As Dipti Bhatnagar and Sam Cossar-Gilbert of Friends of the Earth International reported in *The Ecologist*: "This WTO ruling sets a dangerous precedent for countries wanting to support homegrown renewable energy initiatives."

The National Solar Mission was launched in 2010 by India's then Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. Ben Beachy and Ilana Solomon of the Sierra Club described how the National Solar Mission aims to develop long-term policy, research and development, and domestic production to reduce the cost of solar power generation in India and, ultimately, to increase India's solar capacity to 100,000 megawatts by 2022—a target that would surpass the combined current solar capacity of the world's top five solar-producing countries. By the time of the WTO ruling, the National Solar Mission had already increased India's solar capacity from "nearly nothing" to 5,000 megawatts, Beachy and Solomon reported.

However, US Trade Representative Michael Froman claimed that India's subsidised solar program discriminated against American suppliers, arguing that India's solar plan created unfair barriers to imports of US-made solar panels. As Beachy and Solomon summarised, "the WTO has officially asserted that antiquated trade rules trump climate imperatives".

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25. NYPD Editing Wikipedia on Police Brutality

In March 2015, Kelly Weill reported in Capital New York that computers operating at One Police Plaza, the headquarters of the New York Police Department (NYPD) had been used to "alter Wikipedia pages containing details of alleged police brutality", including the entries for Eric Garner, Sean Bell and Amadou Diallo. Inae Oh wrote for *Mother Jones*: "The pages have been edited to cast the NYPD in a more favorable light and lessen allegations of police misconduct." According to Weill's report, an NYPD spokesperson indicated that the matter is "under internal review".

Capital New York identified 85 Internet protocol (IP) addresses associated with the NYPD that had been used to edit or to attempt to delete Wikipedia entries. "Notable" Wikipedia activity was linked to approximately one dozen of those IP addresses, Weill reported.

On the evening of 3 December 2014, after a Staten Island grand jury ruled not to indict NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo in Eric Garner's "chokehold" death, a computer user on the NYPD headquarters network made multiple edits to the "Death of Eric Garner" Wikipedia entry. As the *Mother Jones* article noted, additional edits suggested that "Garner's death was his own fault".

On three occasions between October 2012 and March 2013, a user on the One Police Plaza network made edits

to Wikipedia's "Stop-and-frisk in New York City" entry.

All of the NYPD edits documented by Capital New York were made anonymously, rather than with a Wikipedia account. Capital New York developed a computer program to search Wikipedia for all of the anonymous edits made from the range of IP addresses registered to One Police Plaza. Weill concluded by providing a link to a list of all the anonymous Wikipedia edits made by NYPD IP addresses. ∞

Editor's Note:

Project Censored was founded in 1976 by Dr Carl Jensen at Sonoma State University, California. Since 2000, the Project has come under the oversight of the non-profit Media Freedom Foundation. The Project's director since 2010 is Professor Mickey Huff, also a board member of the Foundation. Since its inception, the Project has trained more than 2,500 students in media literacy. For more information, visit the website <http://www.projectcensored.org>.

This article is edited from Project Censored's compilation "The Top Censored Stories of 2015–2016". To see the complete text with references and links, go to <http://tinyurl.com/hor99od>. The yearbook *Censored 2017: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Seven Stories Press, 2016) is available from www.projectcensored.org, www.sevenstories.com and www.amazon.com.