

PROJECT CENSORED: The Top 25 News Stories of 2017–18

During the past year, Project Censored reviewed over 300 Validated Independent News stories (VINs), representing the collective efforts of 351 college students and 15 professors from 13 college and university campuses that participated in the Project's Campus Affiliates Program.

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1. Global Decline in Rule of Law as Basic Human Rights Diminish

A 2018 survey conducted in response to global concerns about rising authoritarianism and nationalism shows a major decrease in nations adhering to basic human rights. As the *Guardian* reported, the World Justice Project (WJP)'s "Rule of Law Index 2017–2018" examined legal systems around the world by documenting the experiences of 110,000 households and 3,000 experts and comparing the data with results from previous years. The WJP's Index tabulated these results to calculate scores in eight different categories, including constraints on government powers, absence of corruption, open government, regulatory enforcement, and civil justice, providing an overview of changes in the

rule of law since the previous Index was published in October 2016.

In summarising the WJP's findings, the *Guardian's* report quoted Samuel Moyn, a professor of law and history at Yale University: "All signs point to a crisis not just for human rights, but for the human rights movement. Within many nations, these fundamental rights are falling prey to the backlash against a globalising economy in which the rich are winning."

Since 2016, when the previous WJP Rule of Law Index was published, overall rule of law scores declined in 38 countries, with the greatest declines occurring in the category of fundamental rights, which measures absence of discrimination, right to life and security, due process, freedom of expression and religion, right to privacy, freedom of association, and labour rights.

2. "Open-Source" Intelligence Secrets Sold to Highest Bidders

In March 2017, WikiLeaks released *Vault 7*, which consisted of some 8,761 leaked confidential CIA documents and files from 2013 to 2016, detailing the agency's vast arsenal of tools for electronic surveillance and cyber warfare.

Vault 7, which WikiLeaks described as the "largest ever publication of confidential documents on the agency," drew considerable media attention, including stories in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. However, as George Eliason of *OpEdNews* reported, while *Vault 7* documented the tools at the CIA's disposal, the "most important part" of the disclosure—"the part that needs to frighten you," he wrote—is that "it's not the CIA that's using them." Instead, the malware, viruses, trojans, weaponised "zero-day" exploits, and remote-controlled systems detailed in *Vault 7* are "unclassified, open-source, and can be used by anyone."



(Image: Wikileaks.org)

Eliason's *OpEdNews* series reported how the CIA and other agencies came to rely on private contractors and "open source intelligence," and considered the manifold consequences of these revolutionary changes in intelligence gathering. As he explained in his first *OpEdNews* article, the CIA is limited by law in what it can do with these hacking tools—but subcontractors are not similarly restricted. By using private contractors, the CIA and other government intelligence agencies gain access to intelligence gathered by methods that they are prohibited from using.

As Tim Shorrock reported in a 2015 article in *The Nation*, "Over the last 15 years, thousands of former high-ranking intelligence officials and operatives have left their government posts and taken up senior positions at military contractors, consultancies, law firms, and private-

equity firms. In their new jobs, they replicate what they did in government—often for the same agencies they left." In a 2016 report, Shorrock estimated that 58,000 private contractors worked in national and military intelligence, and 80 per cent of those contractors worked for the five largest corporations in the intelligence-contracting industry. In that report, Shorrock concluded that "not only has intelligence been privatized to an unimaginable degree, but an unprecedented consolidation of corporate power inside US intelligence has left the country dangerously dependent on a handful of companies for its spying and surveillance needs."

Early on, Eliason reported, the private contractors who pioneered open-source intelligence realised that they could circulate (or even sell) the information that they gathered before the agency for which they worked had reviewed and classified it. In this way, "no one broke any laws," Eliason wrote, because the information "shifted hands" before it was sent to an agency and classified.

This loophole created what Eliason described as a "private pipeline of information" that intelligence contractors could use to their advantage. Members of Congress, governors, news outlets, and others often wanted the same "intel" that the CIA had, and, Eliason wrote, open-source intelligence contractors "got paid to deliver Intel for groups looking for specific insights" into creating or influencing government policy.

As a result of these changes, according to Eliason's second article, "People with no security clearances and radical political agendas have state-sized cyber tools at their disposal," which they can use "for their own political agendas, private business, and personal vendettas."

3. World's Richest One Per Cent Continue to Become Wealthier

In November 2017, the *Guardian* reported on Credit Suisse's global wealth report, which found that the richest one per cent of the world now owns more than half of the world's wealth. As the *Guardian* noted, "The world's richest people have seen their share of the globe's total wealth increase from 42.5 per cent at the height of the 2008 financial crisis to 50.1 per cent in 2017." This concentrated wealth amounts to \$140 trillion, according to the Credit Suisse report. The number of millionaires in the world—approximately 36 million people—is now nearly three times greater than in 2000.

This staggering concentration of wealth comes at an extreme cost, as the *Guardian* noted: "At the other end of the spectrum, the world's 3.5 billion poorest adults each have assets of less than \$10,000 (£7,600). Collectively these people, who account for 70 per cent of the world's working age population, account for just 2.7 per cent of global wealth."

The report contained bad news for millennials, as well. As Credit Suisse's chairman, Urs Rohner, noted, "Those with low wealth tend to be disproportionately found



among the younger age groups, who have had little chance to accumulate assets... [W]e find that millennials face particularly challenging circumstances."

4. How Big Wireless Convinced Us Cell Phones and Wi-Fi Are Safe

A Kaiser Permanente study (published December 2017 in *Scientific Reports*) conducted controlled research testing on hundreds of pregnant women in the San Francisco Bay area and found that those who had been exposed to magnetic field (MF) non-ionising radiation associated with cell phones and wireless devices had 2.72 times more risk of miscarriage than those with lower MF exposure.

A March 2018 investigation for *The Nation* by Mark Hertsgaard and Mark Dowie showed how the scope of this public health issue has been inadequately reported by the press and underappreciated by the public. Hertsgaard and Dowie reported that the telecom industry has employed public relations tactics, first pioneered by Big Tobacco in the 1960s and developed by fossil-fuel companies in the 1980s, to influence both the public's understanding of wireless technologies and regulatory debates.

The wireless industry has "war-gamed" science by playing offence as well as defence, actively sponsoring studies that result in published findings supportive of the industry while aiming to discredit competing research that raises questions about the safety of cellular devices and other wireless technologies. When studies have linked wireless radiation to cancer or genetic damage, industry spokespeople have pointed out that the findings are disputed by other researchers. This strategy has proven effective, Hertsgaard and Dowie reported, because "the apparent lack of certainty helps to reassure customers, even as it fends off government regulations and lawsuits that might pinch profits." As Hertsgaard and Dowie concluded:

"Lack of definitive proof that a technology is harmful does not mean the technology is safe, yet the wireless industry has succeeded in selling this logical fallacy to the

world... The upshot is that, over the past 30 years, billions of people around the world have been subjected to a massive public-health experiment: use a cell phone today, find out later if it causes cancer or genetic damage."

Meanwhile, the wireless industry has obstructed a full and fair understanding of the current science, aided by government agencies that have prioritised commercial interests over human health and news organisations that have failed to inform the public about what the scientific community really thinks. In other words, this public-health experiment has been conducted without the informed consent of its subjects, even as the industry keeps its thumb on the scale.

The stakes of this public-health experiment continue to rise with the increasing prevalence of Wi-Fi and Bluetooth technologies as well as the development of the "Internet of Things" and anticipated 5G wireless networks.

Multiple studies, including one published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* in October 2017, have correlated long-term exposure to cell phone radiation with the risk for glioma (a type of brain tumour), meningioma, DNA damage, and other health risks. In May 2017, the California Department of Public Health released safety guidelines in response to possible health impacts from cell phone radiation. Yet this information was withheld from the public for seven years, and only released after litigation. The American Academy of Pediatrics has clear recommendations to reduce children's exposure to cell phone radiation—yet pregnant women continue to use wireless devices on their abdomens and children are given cell phones as toys.

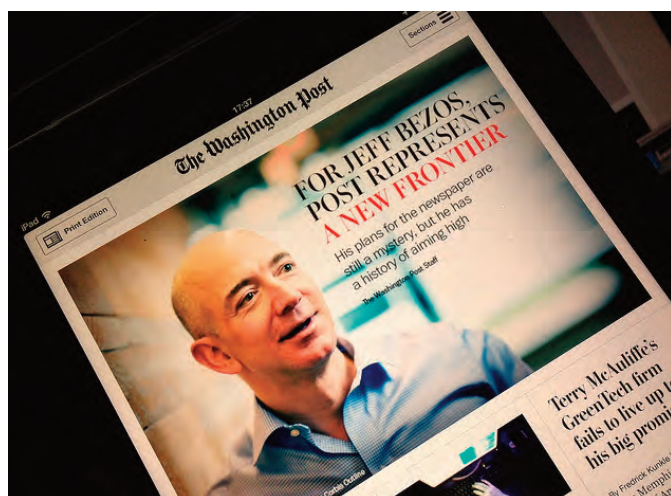


The wireless industry claims to be in compliance with health and safety regulations and opposes mandatory disclaimers about keeping phones at a safe distance. Yet they also oppose updating cell phone radiation testing methods in ways that would accurately represent real-life use.

As the Environmental Health Trust and Marc Arazi have reported, recent scientific research and court rulings from France underscore these concerns about wireless

technology radiation. Under court order, the National Frequency Agency of France (ANFR) recently disclosed that nine out of ten cell phones exceed government radiation safety limits when tested in the way they are actually used, next to the human body. As the Environmental Health Trust reported, French activists coined the term "PhoneGate" because of parallels to the 2015 Volkswagen emissions scandal (referred to informally as "Dieselgate") in which Volkswagen cars "passed" diesel emission tests in the lab, but actually had higher emissions when driven on real roads. In the same way, cell phones "passed" laboratory radiation tests when the "specific absorption rate" (SAR), which indicates how much radiation the body absorbs, was measured at a distance of 15 mm (slightly more than half an inch). However, the way people actually carry and use cell phones (for example, tucked into a jeans pocket or bra, or held in contact with the ear) results in higher levels of absorbed radiation than those found in lab tests.

The French data was also corroborated by a 2017 independent investigation by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) which tested cell phones and found SAR values that surpassed US and Canadian allowable standards when the phones were tested in body contact positions. These findings were replicated by the US Federal Communications Commission, which concluded that radiation levels reach as high as 300 per cent of the limit for safe exposure.



5. Washington Post Bans Employees from Using Social Media to Criticise Sponsors

In June 2017, Andrew Beaujon reported in the *Washingtonian* on a new policy at the *Washington Post* that prohibits the *Post*'s employees from conduct on social media that "adversely affects *The Post*'s customers, advertisers, subscribers, vendors, suppliers or partners."

As Whitney Webb noted in a report for MintPress News, "This new policy offers a simple loophole to corporations that wish to avoid criticism from the *Post*, as becoming a sponsor of the paper would quickly put an end to any unfavourable coverage."

Webb's report also addressed how the policy might affect the *Post*'s coverage of stories involving the CIA. Four months after Jeff Bezos purchased the *Post*, Amazon Web Services signed a \$600 million contract with the CIA for web hosting services that now serve "the entire US intelligence community." (Bezos is the CEO of Amazon.) According to Webb, "long before" the *Post*'s new policy restricting employees' use of social media went into effect, "some had speculated that the connections between the CIA and the *Post* were already affecting its reporting. For example, last year, the *Post* openly called for the prosecution of [Edward] Snowden, despite having previously used the whistleblower's leaks for their Pulitzer Prize-winning report on illegal NSA spying."

6. Russiagate: Two-Headed Monster of Propaganda and Censorship

"Russiagate", which began as a scandal over alleged Russian efforts to sway the 2016 US election, has since proliferated into a drama of dossiers, investigative councils, Russian adoption cover-ups, and an ever-changing list of scandals.

By saturating news coverage with a sensationalised narrative, Russiagate has superseded other important, newsworthy stories. Furthermore, corporate news coverage that has been reflexively hostile toward Russia also serves to link political protest in the United States with Russian operatives and interests in ways that discredit legitimate domestic activism.

In November 2017, Twitter announced policy changes that banned all advertising from two international news outlets owned by Russia, Sputnik and RT. As Robin Andersen of Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) and others revealed, the social media giant based its decision on a single US intelligence report.

The Russiagate narrative that monopolised corporate news cycles throughout 2017 has had real consequences. For example, in February 2018 the Department of Defense's Nuclear Posture Review (last updated in 2010) called for the improvement and readiness of US nuclear capabilities because "Russia's activities and policies have reduced stability and security, increased unpredictability, and introduced new dangers into the security environment."

7. Regenerative Agriculture as "Next Stage" of Civilisation

Regenerative agriculture represents not only an alternative food production strategy but a fundamental shift in our culture's relationship to nature. As Ronnie Cummins, director of the Organic Consumers Association and a founding member of Regeneration International, wrote, regenerative agriculture offers a "world-changing paradigm" that can help solve many of today's environmental and public health problems. Climate disruption, diminishing supplies of clean water, polluted



air and soil, rising obesity, malnutrition and chronic disease, food insecurity, and food waste can all be traced back to modern food production, Cummins noted, and regenerative agriculture is designed to address these problems from the ground up.

The array of techniques that comprise regenerative agriculture rebuilds soils and sequesters carbon. Regenerative farming, Cummins wrote, could potentially draw a critical mass of 200–250 billion tons of carbon from the Earth's atmosphere over the next 25 years, mitigating or even reversing key aspects of global warming. Regenerative agricultural techniques allow carbon to be stored in soils and living plants, where it can increase food production and quality while reducing soil erosion and the damaging runoff of pesticides and fertilisers.

In 2012, nearly two dozen governments around the world (including the United States) spent an estimated \$486 billion to subsidise 50 million industrial farmers who, Cummins wrote, "routinely over-till, over-graze (or under-graze), monocrop, and pollute the soil and the environment with chemicals and GMOs to produce cheap commodities... Meanwhile, 700 million small family farms and herders, comprising the three billion people who produce 70 per cent of the world's food on just 25 per cent of the world's acreage, struggle to make ends meet." Similarly, Cummins reported, "corrupt, out-of-control governments continue to subsidise fossil fuels to the tune of \$5.3 trillion a year, while spending more than \$3 trillion annually on weapons, mainly to prop up our global fossil fuel system and overseas empires."

Industrial farming systems effectively "mine" soils, decarbonising them and, in the process, destroying forests and releasing 44–57 per cent of all climate-destabilising greenhouse gases (including carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide).

"The basic menu for a Regeneration Revolution," Cummins wrote, "is to unite the world's three billion rural farmers, ranchers and herders with several billion health, environmental and justice-minded consumers to overturn 'business as usual' and embark on a global campaign of cooperation, solidarity and regeneration." According to food activist Vandana Shiva, who is quoted in Cummins's

report, "Regenerative agriculture provides answers to the soil crisis, the food crisis, the health crisis, the climate crisis, and the crisis of democracy."

8. Congress Passes Intrusive Data Sharing Law Under Cover of Spending Bill

Hidden in the massive omnibus spending bill approved by Congress in February 2018 was the Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data (CLOUD) Act of 2018. The CLOUD Act enables the US government to acquire data across international borders regardless of other nations' data privacy laws and without the need for warrants.

The CLOUD Act was subject to almost no deliberation as the Senate was working swiftly to avoid a prolonged government shutdown. Describing how congressional leaders decided, behind closed doors, to attach an "unvetted, unrelated data bill" to the \$1.3 trillion government spending bill, the Electronic Frontier Foundation's David Ruiz wrote that Congress had "a professional responsibility... to debate the merits and concerns of this proposal amongst themselves, and this week, they failed." Due to this failure, Ruiz continued, "US laws will be bypassed on US soil." The CLOUD Act gives US and foreign police new mechanisms for seizing data—including private emails, online chats, Facebook posts, and Snapchat videos—from around the world, with few restrictions on how that information is used or shared.



9. Indigenous Communities Around World Helping to Win Legal Rights of Nature

In March 2017, the government of New Zealand officially recognised the Whanganui River—which the indigenous Maori consider their ancestor—as a living entity with rights. By protecting the Whanganui against human threats to its health, the New Zealand law established "a critical precedent for acknowledging the Rights of Nature in legal systems around the world," Kayla DeVault reported for *YES! Magazine*. As DeVault wrote, from New Zealand and Australia to Canada and the United States, "we are seeing a revival" of communities seeking to protect natural systems and

resources on the basis of "non-Western, often indigenous" worldviews that challenge the values of "colonial" governments.

The *YES! Magazine* story described how, after a legal battle spanning more than one hundred years, the Maori Iwi secured protection for the Whanganui by forcing the government to honour Maori "practices, beliefs, and connection" to the river.

As DeVault wrote, if the Maori were able to bridge "the gap in Western and indigenous paradigms in New Zealand, surely a similar effort to protect the Missouri River could be produced for the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River nations by the American government."

In the battle over the Dakota Access pipeline, DeVault reported, the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin "amended its constitution to include the Rights of Nature."

As DeVault noted, if the US government were to recognise the Missouri River's personhood status, the Dakota Access pipeline would become "a much different battle": injuries to the river, including the alteration or curtailment of its free-flowing nature, could result in lawsuits. The risk of future chemical spills could then be sufficient to stop the US Army Corps of Engineers from permitting the pipeline, and any negotiations would require "legitimate consultation and consent from the river's representatives."

If more tribes followed the path of the Ho-Chunk Nation in affirming the rights of nature, DeVault concluded, we might finally see "an end to nonconsented infrastructure projects in Indian Country."

In a detailed article published by *The Conversation*, Mihnea Tanasescu noted that New Zealand's law differed from previous rights of nature laws adopted in Ecuador and Bolivia by designating "specific guardians" for the Whanganui River, including leaders of the indigenous communities that fought for its protection and representatives of the British Commonwealth. As Tanasescu pointed out, the identification of specific representatives is important because without that provision "there is no guarantee that the intended

community will be the one that ends up speaking for nature"; "ambiguous language" could permit abuse, as has happened in Ecuador, where all of nature was granted standing and anyone can go to court to protect it. In contrast, Tanasescu concluded: "By granting natural entities personhood one by one and assigning them specific guardians, over time New Zealand could drastically change an ossified legal system."

10. FBI Racially Profiling "Black Identity Extremists"

In August 2017, the counterterrorism division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued an intelligence assessment warning law enforcement officers, including the Department of Homeland Security, of the danger of "Black Identity Extremists." Jana Winter and Sharon Weinberger reported for *Foreign Policy* that, as "white supremacists prepared to descend on Charlottesville, Virginia, in August, the FBI warned about a new movement that was violent, growing, and racially motivated. Only it wasn't white supremacists; it was 'black identity extremists.'"

According to the SPLC report, the FBI... categorised a range of activists not by their common ideologies or goals, but by race.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)'s Hatewatch staff reported that the FBI's intelligence assessment used the term "BIE" (the Bureau's acronym for "Black Identity Extremists") to describe "a conglomeration of black nationalists, black supremacists, and black separatists, among other disaffiliated racist individuals who are anti-police, anti-white, and/or seeking to rectify perceived social injustices against blacks." According to the SPLC report, the FBI was "taking some heat from historians, academics and former government officials for creating the new 'BIE' term," which categorised a range of activists not by their common ideologies or goals, but by race.

11. US Air Force Seeks to Control 70 Per Cent of Nevada's Desert National Wildlife Refuge

"More than 32,000 people have submitted comments opposing a military takeover of most of Nevada's Desert National Wildlife Refuge," the Center for Biological Diversity reported in March 2018. In order to expand its Nevada Test and Training Range, the US Air Force wants to take control of nearly 70 per cent of the 1.6-million-acre refuge. That would give more than two-thirds of the refuge to the US military and would strip protections for wildlife and restrict public access.

The Air Force's plans for the Desert National Wildlife



Whanganui River (www.doc.govt.nz)



Desert National Wildlife Refuge
(Photo: David McMahan—US Fish and Wildlife Service)

Refuge in Nevada are part of a broader trend toward military expropriation of public lands. The US Navy is secretly conducting electromagnetic warfare training over the Olympic National Forest in Washington; the Air Force wants to test new high-speed weapons—"hypersonics"—in the air space above more than 700,000 acres of public land in Utah, beyond the boundaries of its current Test and Training Range; and, in May 2018, E&E News reported that House Natural Resources Chairman Rob Bishop (R-UT) had added provisions to the latest version of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would "permit indefinite land withdrawals from the Interior Department for military installations with an integrated natural resources management plan."

12. ICE Intends to Destroy Records of Inhumane Treatment of Immigrants

In recent years, numerous news reports have highlighted illegal or inhumane actions committed by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials in their attempts to expel illegal immigrants. Despite the severity and frequency of these abuses, any official records documenting them may soon be destroyed. According to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), ICE officers in the past year have been given provisional approval by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) to destroy thousands of records that document unlawful ICE actions.

As Kali Holloway reported for AlterNet, these records include information on illegal detainment of immigrants, inhumane holding conditions, sexual abuses by officers, and wrongful deaths while in ICE custody. As Victoria López of the ACLU wrote, "ICE proposed various timelines for the destruction of these records ranging from 20 years for sexual assault and death records to three years for reports about solitary confinement." Although murder does not have a statute of limitations, apparently documentation of it can, as long as the crime was committed while the victim was in ICE custody.

13. The Limits of Negative News and Importance of Constructive Media

Research shows that negative news overload has led news consumers to feel increasingly depressed, anxious, and helpless. A 2014 study by NPR, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Harvard School of Public Health found that 40 per cent of the 2,505 respondents polled said that watching, reading, or listening to the news was one of the biggest daily stressors in their lives. Only juggling schedules of family members and hearing about what politicians were doing rated higher as stressors, affecting 48 per cent and 44 per cent of respondents, respectively.

14. FBI Paid Geek Squad Employees as "Confidential Human Source" Informants

New documents released to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) show that the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Louisville field officers have been paying Best Buy Geek Squad employees as informants for more than a decade. A Geek Squad facility in Kentucky has been violating customers' constitutional rights by secretly handing over data found on customer computers to the FBI whenever employees suspected customers of possessing illegal material, such as child pornography. Evidence indicates that the FBI treated Geek Squad employees as confidential human sources, or "CHS," and that at least four Geek Squad CHS were paid for their "services" to the FBI.



Geek Squad car parked at Pentagon Centre, Pentagon City, Virginia (Photo: Ser Amantio di Nicolao)

In 2014, a California doctor, Mark Rettenmaier, was prosecuted for child pornography found on his computer after the Geek Squad had worked on it. The EFF filed a Freedom of Information request in May 2017 to gain a better understanding of the Geek Squad's relationship with the FBI, since such a partnership "potentially circumvents computer owners' Fourth Amendment rights." The Fourth Amendment protects citizens' right to privacy, including protection from unreasonable

searches and seizures by the government. The searches of customers' computers by the Geek Squad are a clear violation of this right because they constituted warrantless searches at the direction of the FBI.

The judge in Rettenmaier's case dismissed the child pornography charges after throwing out much of the evidence collected by investigators due to "false and misleading statements" made by an FBI agent.

15. Digital Justice: Internet Co-Ops Resist Net Neutrality Rollbacks

More than 300 electric cooperatives across the United States are building their own Internet with high-speed fibre networks. These locally-owned networks are poised to do what federal and state governments and the marketplace have not accomplished. First, they are protecting open Internet access from the Internet service providers (ISPs) that stand to pocket the profits from the rollbacks of net neutrality the Trump administration announced in November 2017. Second, they are making affordable and fast Internet accessible to anyone, narrowing the digital divide that otherwise deepens individual and regional socioeconomic inequalities.



#NetNeutrality Twitter campaign by Free Press Action

In Detroit, for example, 40 per cent of the population has no access of any kind to the Internet. Because of Detroit's economic woes, many big telecom companies have apparently decided that it is not worthwhile to invest in expanding their networks to these communities. Internet connectivity is a crucial economic leveller without which people can fall behind in school, health, and the job market.

Detroit is not the only city with residents who aim to own their Internet. Just 30 of the more than 300 tribal reservations in the United States have Internet access. Seventeen tribal reservation communities in San Diego County have secured wireless Internet access under the Tribal Digital Village initiative. Another local effort, Co-Mo Electric Cooperative, which was originally established in 1939 to bring electric power to farms in central Missouri, has organised to crowdfund the necessary resources to establish its own network.

16. Twenty-One Trillion Dollars in Unaccounted Government Spending from 1998 to 2015

Two federal government agencies, the Department of Defense and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), may have accumulated as much as \$21 trillion in undocumented expenses between 1998 and 2015. Independent news sources, including RT and USAWatchdog, reported this finding based on an investigation conducted by Mark Skidmore, a professor of economics at Michigan State University. Skidmore began to research the alleged irregularities in DoD and HUD spending after hearing Catherine Austin Fitts, who was assistant secretary of HUD during the George H.W. Bush administration, say that the Department of Defense's Office of Inspector General (OIG) had found \$6.5 trillion worth of military spending that the Department of Defense could not account for.

The figure given by Fitts was 54 times the US Army's \$122 billion budget as authorised by Congress, leading Skidmore to think that Fitts had meant \$6.5 billion in undocumented spending, not \$6.5 trillion. Typically, adjustments in public budgets are only a small fraction of authorised spending. In an article for *Forbes*, co-authored with Laurence Kotlikoff, Skidmore said the "gargantuan nature" of the undocumented federal spending "should be a great concern to all tax payers."

Although the Pentagon is responsible for \$2.4 trillion in assets, including personnel, real estate, and weapons, it has never been audited.

Working with Fitts and two graduate students, Skidmore investigated reports from the websites of the Departments of Defense and Housing and Urban Development as well as the Office of Inspector General. In one of these reports, Skidmore found an appendix that showed a transfer of approximately \$800 billion from the US Treasury to the Army. As MSU Today reported, not only did Skidmore's queries to the OIG go unanswered, but the OIG also at one point disabled links to "all key documents showing the unsupported spending". Skidmore and his colleagues were able to continue their research because they had already downloaded and stored the relevant documents.

Shortly after Skidmore's findings went public, the Pentagon announced the first ever audit of the Department of Defense. Although the Pentagon is responsible for \$2.4 trillion in assets, including personnel, real estate, and weapons, it has never been audited. The announced audits are set to begin in 2018 and projected to take place annually thereafter.

17. "Model" Mississippi Curriculum Omits Civil Rights Movement from School Textbooks

Inadequate textbooks used in the Mississippi school system are affecting civil rights education, Sierra Mannie reported for the Hechinger Report in October 2017.

In 2011, Mississippi adopted new social studies standards. Before then, public schools in the state were not required to teach the Civil Rights Movement, and the phrase "civil rights" was mentioned only three times in the 305-page document that outlined the previous standards. As Mannie wrote, "The Civil Rights Movement was once a footnote in Mississippi social studies classrooms, if it was covered at all."



(Photo: www.indiatoday.in)

18. Adoption Agencies a Gateway for Child Exploitation

As the *Epoch Times* reported in March 2018: "Global adoption is a big business, fraught with loose regulations and profit incentives that have made it a target for kidnappers, human traffickers, and pedophiles." Though some countries have banned all foreign adoptions, and most others attempt to regulate them, "the problem has continued," Joshua Philipp reported.

In 2016, Uganda tightened its foreign adoption laws to restrict "fast-track foreign adoptions" which had previously allowed children with living parents to be "whisked overseas in a matter of days" under the guise of adoption. In 2017, the *Firstpost* news outlet reported on a "kidnap-for-adoption" racket in India in which an adoption agency was found guilty of "stealing babies from impoverished unwed mothers, rape survivors and marginalised families."

In the United States, the Intercountry Adoption Universal Accreditation Act has required since July 2014 that "all agencies or persons that provide adoption services on behalf of prospective adoptive parents... be accredited or approved, or be a supervised or exempted provider, in compliance with the Intercountry Adoption

Act and Department of State accreditation regulations." However, as Philipp reported, abuse of adoptions, including trafficking and exploitation, "has continued even in the United States." The United States remains among the top destinations for trafficking, according to UNICEF USA.

According to that report: "Trafficking is not just an issue that happens to people in other countries. The United States is a source and transit country and is also considered one of the top destination points for victims of child trafficking and exploitation."

As Geoffrey Rogers, CEO of the US Institute Against Human Trafficking, told the *Epoch Times*, "approximately 60 to 70 per cent of kids that are trafficked in the United States come out of the foster care system." Often this occurs through a process known as "re-homing," in which people who have adopted children "pass the children to new parents with almost no regulation," Philipp wrote.

19. People Bussed across US to Cut Cities' Homeless Populations

An investigative report by the *Guardian* studied homeless relocation plans in major cities and counties across the United States. Released in December 2017, the 18-month investigation recorded 34,240 journeys made by homeless people participating in a variety of city and county relocation programs between 2011 and 2017. Relocation programs provide people who are homeless with free one-way bus or plane tickets out of a given city.

"Some of these journeys provide a route out of homelessness," according to the *Guardian's* in-depth report. The report notes, however, "That is far from the whole story." Although the programs' stated goals are to help people, the *Guardian* noted how relocation schemes "also serve the interests of cities, which view free bus tickets as a cheap and effective way of cutting their homeless populations."

According to the report, "People are routinely sent thousands of miles away after only a cursory check by



authorities to establish they have a suitable place to stay once they get there." Some relocated people told the *Guardian* that they ended up back on the streets, in their new location, "within weeks of their arrival."

Most of the people who participated in relocation programs learned about them through word of mouth or from a caseworker. In most programs, an applicant must provide the contact information for a friend or relative they know in the city to which they intend to travel. However, programs that were investigated did not routinely confirm whether that contact could actually provide shelter assistance to the program participant. Programs were also found to rarely check in with travellers after they had left their original cities.



20. Extravagant Hospital Waste of Unused Medical Supplies

Hospitals in the United States are wasting millions of dollars' worth of sterile and unused medical supplies, practices that impact the cost of healthcare, as Marshall Allen reported for ProPublica in March 2017. The type of equipment that gets thrown away ranges from simple items like surgical masks that cost just over a dollar each, to more expensive equipment such as \$4,000 infant warmers or even \$25,000 ultrasound machines. These wasted supplies add up, accounting for a significant amount of a hospital's operating costs which Americans pay for through higher healthcare costs.

Marshall Allen's report cited a University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) study focused on UCSF's own medical centre. In its neurosurgery department, the study found almost \$1,000 in wasted resources per patient, accounting for nearly \$3 million in estimated annual costs. Notably, many doctors in the UCSF study were unaware of the costs of discarded medical supplies. In response to the study's finding, UCSF established incentives to reduce unnecessary waste, resulting in savings of more than \$800,000 per year.

All US hospitals follow infection control policies that often leave little choice about what to do with supplies left in operating rooms after surgery or unused items left

in patients' rooms after patients are discharged. Due to strict waste management guidelines, the waste will most likely end up in an incinerator rather than a landfill. As ProPublica's report noted, this kind of waste occurs all over the country, despite the existence of nonprofit organisations that accept unused medical supplies as donations and ship them to international medical facilities that are in need.

21. Parkland Shooter's JROTC Connections Spotlight Militarisation of Schools

On February 14, 2018, 19-year-old Nikolas Cruz killed 17 students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. As has become the norm, the Parkland shootings were followed by prodigious media and government hand-wringing about the Second Amendment and the influence of the National Rifle Association (NRA).

But one aspect of Cruz's biography that was not given much, if any, critical attention by the establishment press was his membership in his high school's Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program before he was expelled. A series of reports and interviews by Pat Elder, for *World Beyond War*, *Truthout*, and *Democracy Now!*, highlighted Cruz's connections to the Army JROTC program and its connections to other organisations, including the Civilian Marksmanship Program and the NRA.

Examining links between JROTC programs and the militarisation of schools, Elder, who directs the National Coalition to Protect Student Privacy, an organisation that confronts militarism in schools, wrote: "Few in America have connected the dots between military indoctrination and firearms instruction on the one hand, and the propensity for training mass killers, whether their crimes are committed as enlisted soldiers in atrocities overseas or in American high schools."



Army Junior ROTC cadets from Petal High School in Mississippi. (Photo: Kemberly Groue, www.keesler.af.mil)

22. Big Pharma's Biostitutes: Corporate Media Ignore Root Cause of Opioid Crisis

At least 64,000 people died of drug overdoses in 2016, with more than 80 per cent of those deaths attributed to opioid drugs, according to an August 2017 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Government officials say that the crisis is finally getting Washington's attention, as the *Wall Street Journal* reported in March 2018, but debates over bigger budgets for law enforcement or drug addiction programs continue to feature most prominently in the corporate press. As Abby Martin of *The Empire Files* reported in November 2017, this focus potentially distracts from the root of the problem, which is gross misconduct by drug manufacturing giants and their distributors.

Martin's report featured an interview with Mike Papantonio, a partner in the law firm representing four Ohio counties that are suing pharmaceutical companies for their role in manufacturing the opioid crisis. As Papantonio told Martin: "Big Pharma has operated without any oversight or regulations."

Although federal policies... should have prevented misconduct by Big Pharma manufacturers and distributors, the penalties for violations were too small.

The beginning of the opioid crisis, Martin reported, goes back to drug manufacturing companies hiring "biostitutes," a derogatory term for biological scientists hired to misrepresent research or commit fraud in order to protect their employers' corporate interests. As Martin reported, research by biostitutes was used to make the (misleading) case that opioids could treat pain without the risk of addiction. Purdue Pharma, which manufactures OxyContin, and McKesson, Cardinal Health, and AmerisourceBergen, which distribute that drug and other opioids, suppressed research that showed how addictive opioids are, and they began to push doctors to write more prescriptions on behalf of the "needs" of consumers.

In particular, Papantonio said, distributors targeted the nation's poorer communities, including industrial cities with high unemployment rates, such as Detroit, and economically-stressed mining communities, as in West Virginia. Such mercenary practices not only impacted the individuals who became addicted, they also ravaged the finances of the targeted cities and counties. As Papantonio told *The Empire Files*, the opioid crisis has required local government expenditures for everything from new training for emergency medical responders, to the purchase of Naloxone (sold under the brand name Narcan) for treating opioid overdoses, to the expansion



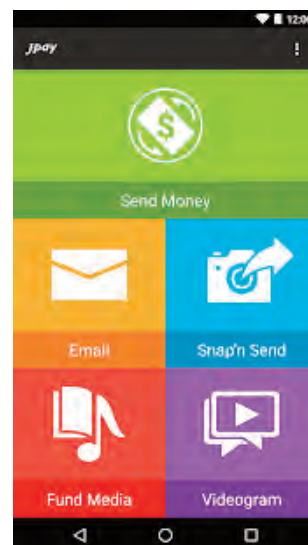
of dependency courts to handle the cases of neglected or abused children, and the retooling of jails as de facto rehabilitation centres—all of which have come out of city and county budgets. In his *Empire Files* interview, Papantonio estimated that the cost for a "typical community" fell between "ninety and two hundred million dollars—that's just the beginning number."

Although federal policies—including, most notably, the Comprehensive Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Act in 1970—should have prevented misconduct by Big Pharma manufacturers and distributors, the penalties for violations were too small. Companies literally treated the fines as business expenses, "leaving the federal government and taxpayers to 'flip the bill'".

23. New Restrictions on Prisoners' First Amendment Rights

On November 1, 2017, the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) implemented strict changes to its prison mail policy that discouraged inmates, their families, and friends from using the US Postal Service. Officially the policy aimed to stop the flow of contraband, including controlled substances, into state prisons. However, as Rand Gould reported for the *San Francisco Bay View*, the policy will actually "stop prisoners, their families and friends from sending mail via the US Postal Service (USPS) and force them into buying email 'stamps' from JPay," allowing JPay and the MDOC to "rake in profits" and closely monitor all mail.

JPay is a private company, based in Florida, that provides money transfer, email, and video visitation services for prisoners and their families. According to a 2012 Bloomberg report, it



services more than one million prisoners in at least 35 states. As the *Bay View* reported, JPay is a subsidiary of Securus, the second-largest prison phone company in the United States.

The new changes come disguised as an effort to curb contraband being smuggled into prisons, although there is little evidence or research to support the recent restrictions as effective measures. Meanwhile, little is done to stop what studies have shown to be significant contraband avenues: data suggests prison employees are responsible for more than 80 per cent of prison contraband traffic. Furthermore, discrepancies identified in the new policy hint at a blatant disregard for consistent lawmaking—for example, inmates' own funds (provided by friends and family) will be used to repackage all incoming envelopes, even ones which meet MDOC's criteria.

24. More Than 80,000 Stolen Guns Worsen Crime in Florida

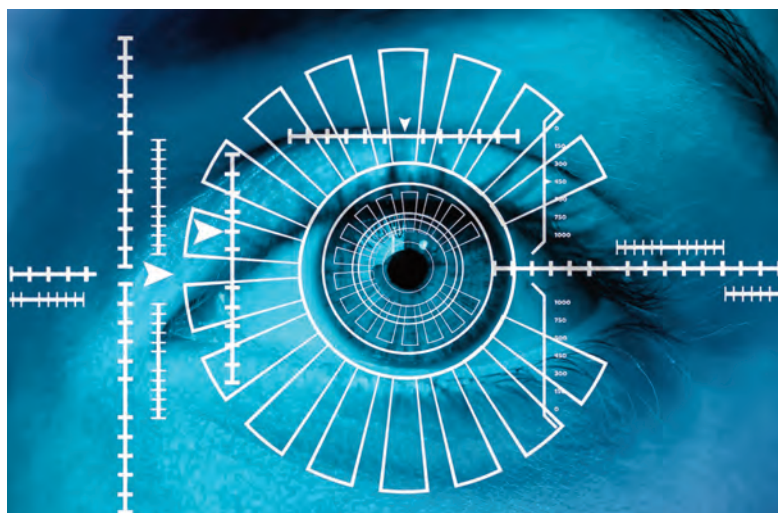
Over the past ten years, more than 82,000 guns stolen in Florida remain missing, Laura Morel reported in November 2017 in joint reports for the *Tampa Bay Times* and the Center for Investigative Journalism's website, Reveal. The study, based on a ten-month investigation of "thousands of law enforcement records," found that in Tampa Bay alone at least 9,000 stolen guns have not been recovered. In 2016, on average, at least one gun was reported stolen every hour.

Those guns turn up in the hands of drug dealers and felons, Morel wrote, and some wind up killing people.



Experts say the figures likely underestimate the actual number of missing guns, in part because Florida law does not require gun owners to report gun thefts, and the Florida Department of Law Enforcement does not keep track of recovered guns. The *Tampa Bay Times/Reveal* study found that five law enforcement agencies in the state documented the theft of nearly 11,000 guns

between 2014 and 2016. Based on this data, only about one in five guns has been recovered.



25. Sheriffs Using Iris Recognition Technology Along US–Mexico Border

In April 2017, the Southwestern Border Sheriffs' Coalition (SBSC) unanimously approved use of new biometric identification technology as a defense against "violent unauthorized immigrants," George Joseph of the Intercept reported. All 31 US counties along the 1,989 miles of the US border with Mexico will receive a free three-year trial of the Inmate Recognition Identification System (IRIS), created by the company Biometric Intelligence and Identification Technologies, or BI2, according to Joseph's Intercept article.

IRIS software photographs and captures the details of an individual's eyes, collecting around 240 characteristic elements within seconds, then examines a database of nearly one million profiles for an identity match. When compared with the roughly 40 to 60 characteristic elements found in fingerprints, BI2's system is far more precise. SBSC hopes that both the stationary and mobile versions of the scanners will create a "digital wall" against criminals. BI2 plans on expanding the use of their system to law enforcement throughout the country. Analysis by the marketing research firm Tractica predicts an annual growth rate of 22.9 per cent in biometric technology revenues, accounting for an estimated \$69.8 billion in revenues over a ten-year period.

Editor's Note:

This article is an edited excerpt from Project Censored's "The Top 25 Censored Stories of 2017–2018". The full text and references are available at <http://tinyurl.com/y7f636nv>. Project Censored's yearbook includes their Top 25 as well as current in-depth media analysis. *Censored 2019: Fighting the Fake News Invasion*, edited by Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth with Project Censored, can be purchased by visiting <http://tinyurl.com/yd6un649>.