



PROJECT CENSORED: The Top 25 News Stories of 2016–17

A journalism program founded in 1976 at California's Sonoma State University is progressed by academics and students in their annual review of the most important news disregarded by America's corporate media.

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1. Widespread Lead Contamination Threatens Children's Health and Could Triple Household Water Bills in the United States

In December 2016, M. B. Pell and Joshua Schneyer reported for Reuters that nearly 3,000 neighbourhoods across the United States had levels of lead poisoning more than double the rates found in Flint, Michigan, at the peak of its contamination crisis. Blood tests showed that more than 1,100 of those communities had rates of lead contamination "at least four times higher" than had been found in Flint.

The World Health Organization in a 2010 report linked lead exposure to children's physical ailments—including anaemia, kidney dysfunction and high blood pressure—and developmental issues—such as impaired peripheral nerve function and decreases in growth, hearing and IQ.

"By school age," Schneyer and Pell wrote in a June

2016 article, "children with a history of lead exposure can exhibit poor attention and impulse control, with lower intelligence and academic performance—a stigma that can follow them through life." The authors quoted Morri E. Markowitz, MD, the Director of the Lead Poisoning Prevention and Treatment Program at The Children's Hospital at Montefiore, New York City: "The lower your IQ, the more trouble learning, the more likely you are to drop out of school, to be delinquent, to be incarcerated."

Reporting for DeSmogBlog in January 2017, Farron Cousins wrote that "lead pipes are time bombs" and water contamination is to be expected. The US relies on an estimated 1.2 million miles of lead pipes for municipal delivery of drinking water, and much of this ageing infrastructure is reaching the end of its lifespan or has exceeded it. He described Flint as "just a tiny piece in a much larger story" about a US water crisis characterised by both contamination and lack of affordability.



US President Barack Obama (centre) drinks filtered water from Flint, Michigan, after a meeting to discuss the public health water crisis, held on 4 May 2016 at the Flint Northwestern High School. (Official White House photo: Pete Souza)

Declaring this the "Era of Infrastructure Replacement", the American Water Works Association estimated in 2012 that a complete overhaul of the nation's ageing water systems would require an investment of US\$1 trillion nationwide over the next 25 years, which could triple the cost of household water bills.

Cousins concluded: "...While the water contamination crisis will occasionally steal a headline or two, virtually no attention has been paid to the fact that we're pricing a third of United States citizens out of the water market."

2. Over Six Trillion Dollars in Unaccountable US Army Spending

According to a July 2016 report by the US Department of Defense (DoD) Office of Inspector General, over the past two decades the US Army has accumulated \$6.5 trillion in expenditures that cannot be accounted for, because two government offices—the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army and the DoD's Defense Finance and Accounting Service—"did not prioritize correcting the system deficiencies that caused errors... and did not provide sufficient guidance for supporting system-generated adjustments".

In the report's bureaucratic language, the expenditures themselves are referred to as "unsupported adjustments" and the lack of complete and accurate records of them is described as "material weakness". In other words, as Dave Lindorff explained in *This Can't Be Happening!* in August 2016, the DoD "has not been tracking or recording or auditing all of the taxpayer money allocated by Congress—what it was spent on, how well it was spent, or where the money actually ended up".

In 1996, US Congress enacted legislation requiring all government agencies—including not only the DoD but

also the federal government's departments of Education, Veterans Affairs, and Housing and Urban Development, for instance—to undergo annual audits.

Mandy Smithberger, Director of the Straus Military Reform Project at the Project on Government Oversight, told Lindorff: "Accounting at the Department of Defense is a disaster, but nobody is screaming about it because you have a lot of people in Congress who believe in more military spending, so they don't really challenge military spending."

Thomas Hedges reported for the *Guardian* in March 2017 that "the Pentagon has exempted itself without consequence for 20 years now, telling the Government Accountability Office...that collecting and organizing the required information for a full audit is too costly and time-consuming". Hedges also quoted Rafael DeGennaro, Director of the Audit the Pentagon coalition: "Over the last 20 years, the Pentagon has broken every promise to Congress about when an audit would be completed. Meanwhile, Congress has more than doubled the Pentagon's budget."

The corporate media have not covered news about the \$6.5 trillion in unaccountable US Army expenditures.



3. Pentagon Paid British PR Firm for Fake al-Qaeda Videos

The Pentagon paid a British public relations company more than \$660 million to run a top-secret propaganda program in Iraq from at least 2006 to December 2011, revealed Crofton Black and Abigail Fielding-Smith in an October 2016 Bureau of Investigative Journalism exposé. The UK-based PR firm Bell Pottinger produced short TV segments made to appear like Arabic news stories and insurgent videos, according to a former employee.

Bell Pottinger's former Chairman, Lord (Timothy) Bell, confirmed that his firm had worked on a "covert" military operation "covered by various secrecy agreements" and that he had reported to the Pentagon, the CIA and the National Security Council on his company's work in Iraq.

A former employee, Martin Wells, who worked as a video editor in Iraq, said that the firm's output had been

approved by General David Petraeus, then Commander of the Multi-National Force in Iraq, and on occasion by the White House.

In a year when pundits and politicians of all stripes as well as members of the public and the establishment press crowded over "fake news", the US corporate media completely ignored the story of how one of the most powerful US government institutions, the Department of Defense, secretly used taxpayer money to create fake news of its own.

4. Voter Rights Suppression in the 2016 Presidential Election

The *Voting Rights Act of 1965* addressed discrimination in voting by requiring all state and local governments with a history of racial discrimination to have preclearance from the federal government before making any changes to their voting laws or procedures.

In 2013, the US Supreme Court ruled 5–4 in *Shelby County v. Holder* that a key provision of the Voting Rights Act—the section that determined which state and local governments must comply with the Act's preapproval requirement—was unconstitutional and could no longer be used. As Ari Berman and others reported, this made 2016 the first US presidential election in 50 years without the full protections guaranteed by the Voting Rights Act. Specifically, as a result of the *Shelby* decision, changes to voting laws in nine states and parts of six others with long histories of racial discrimination in voting were no longer subject to federal government approval.

Since *Shelby*, 14 states, including many southern states as well as key swing states, implemented new voting restrictions, in many cases just in time for the election. Texas implemented a photo-ID law that resulted in one of the lowest voter turnouts in the United States. In North Carolina, a voter-ID requirement permitted just a few acceptable forms of identification; according to data from the State Board of Elections, over 300,000 registered voters lacked even one accepted form of ID. Arizona made changes to its voting laws that the Department of Justice had previously rejected because of minority voter discrimination. Florida converted to elections in English only in many counties, and also changed poll locations at the last minute.

5. Big Data and Dark Money behind the 2016 Presidential Election

American right-wing computer scientist and hedge-fund billionaire Robert Mercer was the top donor to Donald Trump's presidential campaign, contributing \$13.5 million and helping lay the groundwork for what is now called the Trump Revolution. In addition, Mercer funded Cambridge Analytica, a data analytics company that specialises in "election management strategies" and uses microtargeting. Mercer's money also enabled Steve Bannon to fund Breitbart.

Since 2010, Mercer has donated \$95 million to right-wing political campaigns and nonprofit groups. He has given funds to The Heartland Institute, a climate change "denial" think-tank, and the Media Research Center, which refers to itself as "America's Media Watchdog" and aims to correct "liberal bias".

Cambridge Analytica is affiliated with the British-based company SCL (Strategic Communication Laboratories) Group. Alexander Nix, the Chief Executive Officer of Cambridge Analytica, said in a company press release on the day after Trump's victory: "We are thrilled that our revolutionary approach to data-driven communications played such an integral part in President-elect Donald Trump's extraordinary win." Cambridge Analytica began working for the Trump campaign in June 2016, after initially providing analysis for candidate Ted Cruz.



Hillary Clinton vs Donald Trump (Image: DonkeyHotey)

According to Alexander Nix, Cambridge Analytica combines behavioural science based on measurement of psychological traits, Big Data analysis premised on the fact that everything we do leaves digital traces, and advertisement-targeting aligned to "the personality of an individual". This approach informed direct messaging not only to potential Trump voters but also to Trump's canvassers. From July 2016, Cambridge Analytica used an app, known as Groundgame, to identify the political views and personality types of the inhabitants of a house.

As Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus reported for Motherboard (VICE) in January 2017: "...Trump's people only rang at the doors of houses that the app rated as receptive to his messages. The canvassers came prepared with guidelines for conversations tailored to the personality type of the resident. In turn, the canvassers fed the reactions into the app, and the new data flowed back to the dashboards of the Trump campaign." (Advocates in the Brexit campaign used the same app.)

While Hillary Clinton and the Democrats relied on traditional demographic data to inform their campaign, Cambridge Analytica and the Trump campaign divided the US population into 32 personality types and focused on 17 specific states.

6. Antibiotic-Resistant "Superbugs" Threaten Health and Foundations of Modern Medicine

Pharmaceutical companies that produce antibiotics are creating dangerous superbugs when their factories leak industrial waste, reported Madlen Davies in September 2016 for The Bureau of Investigative Journalism.

Superbugs are bacteria that have become resistant to antibiotics. Pharmaceutical factories in China and India, where most of the world's antibiotics are manufactured, are releasing "untreated waste fluid" into local soils and waters, leading to increased antimicrobial resistance that diminishes the effectiveness of antibiotics and threatens the foundations of modern medicine. A number of the companies have established links to US markets.

After bacteria in the environment become resistant to antibiotics, they can exchange genetic material with other germs, spreading antibiotic resistance around the world, according to an assessment by the European Public Health Alliance that served as the basis for Davies's news report. In her overview, Davies described a case in which a drug-resistant bacterium that originated in India in 2014 has since been found in more than 70 other countries.

7. The Toll of US Navy Training on Marine Wildlife in the North Pacific

United States Navy training activities are deadly for marine mammals in the North Pacific Ocean. Over a five-year period, the navy killed, injured or harassed whales, dolphins, porpoises, sea lions and other marine wildlife nearly 12 million times—legally, according to a May 2016 exposé by Dahr Jamail for Truthout.

The West Coast Action Alliance (WCAA), a coalition that aims to protect the nation's national and state parks, airspace and waters, combined data from the US Navy's Northwest Training and Testing environmental impact statement and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Letters of Authorization for the number of "takes" of marine mammals caused by navy exercises. A "take" is harm done to an animal, with impacts ranging from harassment, resulting in behavioural changes, to death. The WCAA found that, over a five-year period, the US Navy had been responsible for more than 11.8 million takes of marine mammal species in four North Pacific areas of operation—a figure that Karen Sullivan, a WCAA spokesperson and former endangered-species biologist with the US Fish & Wildlife Service, described as "staggering".

According to Emily Stolarcyk, Program Manager of the Eyak Preservation Council in Cordova, Alaska: "...With the limited observation practiced, the Navy's activities have proved lethal to large marine species. What about the unknown impacts?"

As the WCAA commented, these 11.8 million takes do not include the impacts on "endangered and threatened seabirds, fish, sea turtles or terrestrial species" due to navy activities. With little oversight on US Navy training



activities, the public is left in the dark regarding their environmental consequences, including especially how navy operations have an effect on fish in the North Pacific and marine life at the bottom of the food chain.

There has been almost no coverage of these impacts in the US corporate press. However, in July 2016, the *Washington Post* reported on a federal appeals court ruling in San Francisco which found that the navy's use of loud, low-frequency sonar had violated marine mammal protection laws.

8. Maternal Mortality a Growing Threat in the United States

Each year in the United States, over 65,000 pregnant women suffer life-threatening complications, including physical and psychological conditions aggravated by pregnancy, and over 600 die from pregnancy-related causes. Elizabeth Dawes Gay reported for Women's eNews in April 2016 that inadequate health care in rural areas and racial disparities are drivers of this maternal health crisis. Nationally, African American women are three to four times more likely than white women to die from pregnancy-related causes, with rates even higher in parts of the US that Gay characterised as "pockets of neglect", such as Georgia where the 2011 maternal mortality rate of 28.7 per 100,000 live births was nearly double the national average.

Women's Policy, Inc., a nonprofit, nonpartisan, public policy organisation [now the Women's Congressional Policy Institute], hosted a briefing in April 2016 for US maternal mortality experts to address problems and present solutions to a panel of congressional staffers, federal employees and women's health advocates. "The US is the only nation in the developed world with a rising maternal mortality rate," Representative Lois Capps stated at the meeting. Keisha Callins, MD, identified issues that contribute to the rising maternal mortality rate, including "provider shortages; lack of physical access to care; ...low educational attainment, poverty, poor access to healthy foods, neighborhood violence and stress".

Another factor in maternal health care is the prevalence of Caesarean section (C-section) deliveries. The World Health Organization recommends that no more than 10

to 15 per cent of births should be C-section deliveries. In the US, one in three babies is delivered by C-section.

9. Democratic National Committee Claims Right to Select Presidential Candidate

In June 2016, Beck & Lee, a legal firm based in Miami, Florida, filed a class-action suit on behalf of supporters of US Senator Bernie Sanders against the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and its former Chair, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, alleging that the DNC broke legally binding neutrality agreements in the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries by strategising to make Hillary Clinton the nominee before a single vote was cast.

Transcripts from the lawsuit's hearing, which took place in a Fort Lauderdale, Florida, federal court in April 2017, document the DNC's lack of commitment to key articles of its own charter.

10. Record Year for Global Internet Shutdowns

Governments around the world shut down Internet access more than 50 times in 2016, reported Lyndal Rowlands for the Inter Press Service (IPS) in December of that year. These shutdowns limited freedom of speech, swayed elections and damaged economies. "In the worst cases," Rowlands wrote, "internet shutdowns have been associated with human rights violations"—as was the case in Ethiopia and Uganda. Rowlands quoted Deji Olukotun, Senior Global Advocacy Manager at the digital rights group Access Now: "What we have found is that internet shutdowns go hand in hand with atrocities."



Many governments intentionally blocked out Internet access during elections and to quell protests. However, not only do these Internet shutdowns restrict freedom of speech, they also hurt economies around the world. IPS, TechCrunch and other independent news organisations referred to a Brookings Institution study which found that Internet shutdowns cost countries \$2.4 billion between July 2015 and June 2016, with the biggest losses in India (an estimated \$968 million), Saudi Arabia (\$465 million) and Morocco (\$320 million).

Darrell West, the author of the Brookings Institution study, cautioned that the figures are only estimates and the actual economic costs are likely to be even higher. West wrote that "the \$2.4 billion figure is a conservative estimate that likely *understates* the actual economic damage" because it does not include "lost tax revenues associated with blocked digital access, impact on worker productivity, barriers to business expansion connected with these shutdowns, or the loss of investor, consumer, and business confidence resulting from such disruptions".

Overall, West noted in the Brookings study: "...As long as political authorities continue to disrupt internet activity, it will be difficult for impacted nations to reap the full benefits of the digital economy."

In a nonbinding resolution adopted on 30 June 2016 by more than 70 countries, the United Nations Human Rights Council lauded the Internet's "great potential to accelerate human progress" and condemned "measures aiming to or that intentionally prevent or disrupt access to or dissemination of information online". According to the resolution, "the exercise of human rights, in particular the right to freedom of expression, on the Internet is an issue of increasing interest and importance".

11. Law Enforcement Surveillance of Telephone Records and Seizure of Protesters' Cellphones

In cooperation with the telco AT&T, US federal, state and local law enforcement agencies have been secretly collecting telephone records since 1987 under a program known as Hemisphere, according to a November 2016 report for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) by Aaron Mackey and Dave Maass.

The Hemisphere Project's database contains "trillions of domestic and international phone call records", and AT&T "adds roughly four billion phone records" each day, including "calls from non-AT&T customers that pass through the company's switches". These call records for individuals include phone numbers dialed, calls received and each call's time, date and length.

Furthermore, the collected data allows the Drug Enforcement Administration and other federal agencies as well as state and local police to undertake "complicated traffic analysis that can dynamically map people's social networks and physical locations".

Information that the EFF gleaned from its Freedom of Information Act requests as well as from lawsuits it filed against federal and California law enforcement agencies suggests that officials collect and analyse this sensitive data "without a warrant or any judicial oversight".

In secret documents obtained by the EFF, police tout Hemisphere as a "Super Search Engine" and "Google on Steroids". These descriptions, Mackey and Maass wrote, indicate that "Hemisphere is a mass surveillance program that threatens core civil liberties".

The Hemisphere Project was unknown until 2013 when a presentation about it was "inadvertently released to a privacy activist", the EFF revealed. The government and law enforcement agencies have made it their mission to keep this program hidden from the public eye. Police using data collected through Hemisphere were instructed to ensure that the program never appeared in the public record. After police obtained private information about someone by using Hemisphere, they would engage in a controversial practice called "parallel construction" to obtain the targeted data through traditional subpoenas.



The logo of the Hemisphere Project
(Image: Office of National Drug Control Policy)

On 20 January 2017, the day that Donald Trump was sworn in as President, protests took place a short distance away from the Capitol. Metropolitan Police Department officers in Washington, DC, arrested more than 230 individuals, charging them under felony riot laws and seizing some of their cellphones. AlterNet journalist Sarah Lazare and CityLab correspondent George Joseph reported that law enforcement officials were compelling Facebook, Apple and Google to turn over personal data for at least some of the people arrested.

This story is critically important for several reasons. Mark Goldstone, an attorney affiliated with the National Lawyers Guild, has defended protesters in Washington, DC, for more than 30 years. He emphasised to AlterNet that he had never heard of a case in which mobile phones were seized at protests and was unaware of any previous cases in which protesters faced felony riot charges. A felony riot charge carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison and a fine of up to \$25,000.

Citizens' rights are further threatened as local, state and federal law enforcement are increasingly equipped with both cellphone interception and cellphone extraction devices. George Joseph wrote in February 2017 that the 50 largest police departments in the US have invested heavily in military-grade surveillance tools. One device, called a Dirtbox in honour of Digital Receiver Technology, the company that produces the device, can track 10,000 cellphones at once.

In May 2017, the *Guardian* reported that, since Donald

Trump was elected President, more than 20 states have proposed bills that would "crack down" on protests and demonstrations in ways that United Nations experts have described as "criminalizing peaceful protests".

12. United States Quietly Establishes New "Anti-Propaganda" Centre

On 23 December 2016, then President Barack Obama signed the *National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017*. As Sarah Lazare reported for AlterNet, the NDAA includes a provision to create a new federal centre with "sweeping" surveillance powers to counter foreign "propaganda and disinformation". Lazare wrote that the Global Engagement Center will be granted "broad and ill-defined powers to surveil the 'populations most susceptible to propaganda', compile reporting and social media messaging critical of the US government and disseminate pro-American propaganda". The NDAA has set aside \$160 million to be used in fighting propaganda and disinformation deemed unfavourable to US interests.

The NDAA states: "The purpose of the Center shall be to lead, synchronize, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining United States national security interests."

For example, the Center will be tasked with monitoring and tracking "counterfactual narratives abroad that threaten the national security interests of the United States and United States allies and partner nations". Lazare noted that the imprecise wording of the NDAA "could be interpreted as targeting information and communications critical of the US government".

The NDAA authorises the Global Engagement Center to provide "grants or contracts of financial support" to "civil society groups, media content providers, nongovernmental organizations, federally funded research and development centers, private companies, or academic institutions". These groups, according to Rick Sterling in a Consortium News article, would be hired to identify and investigate print and online news sources deemed to be distributing "disinformation...and propaganda directed at the United States and its allies and partners".

13. Right-Wing Money Promotes Legislation to Restrict Free Speech on US Campuses

Right-wing conservatives are using money and power to influence public policy to suppress student dissent on US college and university campuses.

The right-wing Goldwater Institute, which is funded by conservatives including Charles Koch and the Mercer family, has proposed model legislation that seeks to quell student dissent in favour of guest speakers who attempt to discredit climate change, oppose LGBTQ rights and espouse hate speech, Alex Kotch reported in March 2017 for AlterNet.

14. Judges across the United States Use Racially Biased Software to Assess Defendants' Risk of Committing Future Crimes

Courtrooms across the USA are using algorithmically generated scores, known as "risk assessments", to rate a defendant's risk of committing future crime and, in many states—including Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin—to unofficially inform judges' sentencing decisions. The Justice Department's National Institute of Corrections now encourages the use of such assessments at every stage of the criminal justice process.

For a study published in May 2016, a ProPublica team "obtained the risk scores assigned to more than 7,000 people arrested in Broward County, Florida, in 2013 and 2014 and checked to see how many were charged with new crimes over the next two years". The study was specifically intended to evaluate whether an algorithm known as COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions) produced accurate prediction results through its assessment of "so-called 'criminogenic needs' that relate to the major theories of criminality, including 'criminal personality', 'social isolation', 'substance abuse' and 'residence/stability'". The ProPublica team found that risk scores produced by the algorithm were "remarkably unreliable" in forecasting violent crimes: "Only 20 percent of the people predicted to commit violent crimes actually went on to do so." The team also found that the algorithm was "particularly likely to falsely flag black defendants as future criminals".

...the film addressed the potentially drastic consequences of climate change, including extreme weather, flooding, famines and climate refugees.

15. Shell Understood Climate Change as Early as 1991—and Ignored It

In 1991, Shell Oil Company produced and distributed a 28-minute documentary titled *Climate of Concern*. Asserting that climate change was taking place "at a rate faster than at any time since the end of the ice age—change too fast perhaps for life to adapt, without severe dislocation", the film addressed the potentially drastic consequences of climate change, including extreme weather, flooding, famines and climate refugees. While commenting that global warming is "not yet certain", the Shell film stated that "many think that to wait for final proof would be irresponsible".

The film's narrator explained that "a uniquely broad consensus of scientists" had issued a "serious warning" in a report to the United Nations at the end of 1990. (The

landmark report identified in the Shell documentary was "Climate Change: The IPCC Scientific Assessment".)

16. "Resilient" Indian Communities Struggle to Cope with Impacts of Climate Change

The Sundarbans is a vast mangrove delta that connects India and Bangladesh along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. In Bengali, Sundarban means "beautiful forest", and the region has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, as Anuradha Sengupta reported for *Yes! Magazine* in June 2016, residents of islands such as Ghoramara in the Sundarbans are "struggling to cope" with rising seas, erratic weather patterns, severe floods, heavy rainfall and intense cyclones.



A Royal Bengal tiger photographed in the Sundarbans, the world's largest coastal mangrove forest with an area of 10,000 square kilometres. Located in the vast river deltas of the Bay of Bengal straddling India and Bangladesh, the Sundarbans was recognised in 1997 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. (Photo: Purnanshi)

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that rising sea levels mean that areas like the Sundarbans "will bear the brunt of climate change", with submerged lands, farmlands damaged by increasingly saline soils, homes swept away, livelihoods destroyed and families broken apart. "The effects of global warming," Sengupta clarified, "will be most severe on those who did the least to contribute to it, and who can least afford measures to adapt or save themselves." Nevertheless, she added, "people here are resilient".

17. Young Plaintiffs Invoke Constitutional Grounds for Climate Protection

In September 2015, 21 plaintiffs aged from eight to 19 brought a lawsuit against the federal government and the fossil fuel industry to the US Federal District Court in Eugene, Oregon. In the case, *Juliana v. United States*, it was argued that the federal government and the fossil fuel industry have knowingly endangered the plaintiffs by



Julia Olson, Executive Director and Chief Legal Counsel of Our Children's Trust (Photo: ourchildrenstrust.org)

promoting the burning of fossil fuels, and this violates their constitutional and public trust rights. The plaintiffs said in their complaint that the defendants "deliberately allow[ed] atmospheric CO₂ concentrations to escalate to levels unprecedented in human history".

Julia Olson, lead counsel for the plaintiffs, is Executive Director of Our Children's Trust, a Eugene-based group advocating for "legally-binding, science-based climate recovery policies".

In April 2016, US Magistrate Judge Thomas Coffin denied a motion to dismiss the case, ruling in favour of the plaintiffs' charge that the federal government violates constitutional and public trust rights by its ongoing promotion of fossil fuels that destabilise the Earth's climate. In November 2016, US District Court Judge Ann Aiken affirmed Judge Coffin's ruling, preparing the way for *Juliana v. United States* to proceed to trial.

"This is no ordinary lawsuit," Judge Aiken wrote at the beginning of her opinion. As Professor Gabriela Steier reported for Jurist.org in January 2017, Judge Aiken went on to explain: "This action is of a different order than the typical environmental case. It alleges that defendants' actions and inactions—whether or not they violate any specific statutory duty—have so profoundly damaged our home planet that they threaten plaintiffs' fundamental constitutional rights to life and liberty."

In February 2017, the plaintiffs updated their case to list President Donald Trump as a defendant, replacing President Barack Obama. A month later, the Trump administration filed a motion to delay trial preparation.

As the *Censored 2018* yearbook goes to print, the plaintiffs are pursuing an effort to depose Rex Tillerson, Donald Trump's Secretary of State and former Chairman and CEO of ExxonMobil. In the meantime, the USA's most powerful fossil fuel lobbies are seeking the judge's permission to withdraw from the lawsuit.

18. Rise in Number of Transgender Murders

In her "comprehensive look at transgender murders since 2010", Meredith Talusan reported for Mic Network in December 2016 on "how and why trans lives are not counted and what we can do to end the violence".

Talusan's overview began with a revealing comparison of homicide figures. Among the general US population, one in 19,000 persons is murdered every year. For young adults aged 15 to 34, the figure is one in 12,000; but for black trans women in the same age range, the rate is one in 2,600. Talusan wrote that if all Americans had the same murder risk in 2015 as young black trans women, then based on FBI data "there would have been 120,087 murders instead of 15,696 murders". Put another way, although the total number of transgender homicides per year may seem small, it "represents a rate of violence that far exceeds that of the general population".

In fact, as Talusan documented in her study, due to underreporting and misidentification (many trans murder victims are "misgendered" by officials and news reports, and even by immediate family members who sometimes reject a relative's transgender identity) "the actual trans murder rate is much higher".

"...far from any conventional battlefield or public scrutiny, tear gas and other chemical weapons are routinely used against people held captive in enclosed spaces..."

19. Chemical Weapons Used on US Prisoners

Daniel Moattar, writing for *The Nation* magazine, and Sarah Lazare, a journalist with AlterNet, reported on how chemical weapons, including several types of tear gas, are being used against prisoners in the United States, despite the fact that the international Chemical Weapons Convention of 1997 bans their use in warfare.

Lazare revealed that even though this arms control treaty now binds nearly 200 nations, "in prisons and jails across the United States, far from any conventional battlefield or public scrutiny, tear gas and other chemical weapons are routinely used against people held captive in enclosed spaces, including [in] solitary confinement".

Tear gas causes skin and respiratory irritation, intense pain and blindness; in severe cases, it can lead to death.

20. Seattle Activist Group Leads First Successful Campaign to Defund Police

In September 2016, the Block the Bunker campaign in Seattle, Washington, was the first to persuade US city officials to divest from police funding and allocate more tax dollars for community services.

As Melissa Hellman wrote for *Yes! Magazine* in March 2017, anti-racist grassroots activists protested in the



Supporters of Seattle's Block the Bunker campaign speak out against the plan for a new police station. (Photo: socialistworker.org)

summer of 2016 against the city's plan to spend nearly \$150 million on a new police station in North Seattle. As a result, the mayor shelved the plan for the 2017 budget and added \$29 million to the affordable housing budget.

According to The Movement for Black Lives, no other grassroots organisation is known to be actively working on divestment policy, and this is the first such campaign to be successful.

21. Fossil Fuel Industry Is "Colonising" American Universities

Without the public's awareness, fossil fuel interests—representing oil, gas and coal companies as well as utilities and investors—"have colonized nearly every nook and cranny of energy and climate policy research in American universities", two PhD associates from Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) wrote in March 2017 in the *Guardian*.

Fossil fuel interests dominate energy and climate policy research at the most prominent universities, including Harvard, MIT, Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley. According to Dr Benjamin Franta and Dr Geoffrey Supran in their article: "...The very experts we assume to be objective, and the very centers of research we assume to be independent, are connected with the very industry the public believes they are objectively studying. Moreover, these connections are often kept hidden." Having more than just "conflicts of interest", these are "industry projects with the appearance of neutrality and credibility given by academia".

22. Lawsuit Exposes Militarisation of Law Enforcement inside Prisons

Against a backdrop of national concern over the militarisation of police, Brian Dolinar reported in January 2017 for Truthout that a judge has approved a 2015 lawsuit against 232 Illinois Department of Corrections

(IDOC) officers to proceed to the discovery phase. The class-action suit, *Ross v. Gossett*, brought on behalf of prisoners at Menard, Illinois River, Big Muddy River and Lawrence correctional centres, alleges that the "Orange Crush" tactical team used excessive force, including physical and sexual abuse, when it conducted mass shakedowns in the spring of 2014. As Dolinar wrote, "less is known beyond prison walls about guards who regularly brutalize those incarcerated", but the Illinois lawsuit "names a list of horrific abuses" including "strip searches, beatings and mass shakedowns of cells", indicating how the militarisation of law enforcement has occurred inside prisons as well as in public.

Dolinar described the development and increasing use of so-called Special Operations Response Teams, also known as tactical teams, in prisons across the US since the 1971 rebellion at Attica in New York. Dolinar's report focused in particular on one such group within IDOC that has come to be known informally as the "Orange Crush", referencing their orange jumpsuits and "horrific abuses". IDOC Orange Crush teams, Dolinar noted, emerged after 1996 when Illinois attempted to address the problem of prison gangs, including the Vice Lords and Latin Kings, that "ran many illicit operations with the full cooperation of prison authorities".



An IDOC "Orange Crush" tactical team in action (Image: from a video posted by Joe Galbo on YouTube)

23. Facebook Buys Sensitive User-Data to Offer Marketers Targeted Advertising

Julia Angwin, Terry Parris, Jr, and Surya Mattu reported for ProPublica that, since 2012, Facebook has been buying sensitive information about users' offline lives from data-brokers and combining it with the online data it collects, in order to sell this information to advertisers who seek to target specific types of Facebook users for its products and services.

Facebook utilises "a particularly comprehensive set of dossiers" on its more than two billion members in order to "offer marketers a chance to target ads to increasingly

specific groups of people". As Angwin, Parris and Mattu exposed in their article of September 2016, "Facebook offers advertisers more than 1,300 categories for ad targeting—everything from people whose property size is less than .26 acres to households with exactly seven credit cards".

In their December 2016 ProPublica report, the authors quoted Jeffrey Chester, Executive Director of the Center for Digital Democracy. Facebook is "not being honest", he said. "Facebook is bundling a dozen different data companies to target an individual customer, and an individual should have access to that bundle as well."

24. Eight Use-of-Force Policies to Prevent Killings by Police

Killings by the police are not inevitable or difficult to prevent, according to a study published in September 2016 by Campaign Zero, a police-reform group formed in the aftermath of the Ferguson protests.

The study, titled "Police Use of Force Policy Analysis", examined police departments in 91 of the USA's largest cities and found that departments with stricter use-of-force regulations killed significantly fewer people. Noting that "many police departments fail to establish common sense restrictions on police use of force" and that police violence is "distributed disproportionately", with black people being three times more likely to be killed by police than their white counterparts, the study's authors wrote that "fundamentally changing use of force polic[i]es can dramatically reduce the number of people killed by police in America". The study identified eight policies to restrict how and when police officers should use force.

Samuel Sinyangwe, one of the study's researchers and authors, explained to Alice Speri of The Intercept that few departments have implemented all or most of these policies, partly due to "resistance from police unions that claim more restrictive policies will endanger officers". On the contrary, the Campaign Zero study showed that the numbers of officers assaulted or killed in the line of duty decreased in proportion to the number of regulations adopted by their department.

As Jamilah King wrote for Mic in September 2016, the study is "the first wide-scale analysis to demonstrate the connection between differing 'use of force' policies and the rate of police killings".

Sinyangwe told King: "Two years ago we didn't even have the data to know which police departments were killing people at higher rates than others and why. Now we can identify the key policies to prevent these killings."

25. Juvenile Court Fees Punish Children for Their Families' Poverty

Children from low-income families across the United States are being imprisoned when their families cannot afford to pay court fees, Nika Knight reported in August 2016 for Common Dreams. These children face, aside

from court costs, fees for probation, health tests, care and additional services in juvenile facilities. This amounts to "punishing children for their families' poverty", Knight observed, "and that may be unconstitutional".

For her article, Knight drew on a 2016 report by the Juvenile Law Center, a legal aid advocacy group, which "reviewed statutes in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to assess the legal framework for financial obligations placed on youth in the juvenile justice system and their families".



Knight identified "myriad ways" in which juvenile court systems levy fines on children's families "and then imprison those children when their families are too poor to pay the mounting costs". These include, for example, monthly fees on families whose children are sentenced to probation, the costs of "diversion" programs intended to keep children out of detention, and charges for court-ordered evaluations and tests (such as mental health evaluations, tests for sexually transmitted diseases, and drug and alcohol assessments). When families cannot afford to pay these fees and fines, children may be incarcerated instead.

Furthermore, Knight elaborated, in some states parents themselves may also face imprisonment if they fail to pay fees and fines levied against their children. Incarcerating parents puts children at further risk and also adds to the stresses on families who are already struggling with the consequences of poverty.

The authors of the Juvenile Law Center's report stated: "...When parents face incarceration or mounting debt for failure to pay, they have even fewer resources to devote to educating, helping, and supporting their children." ∞

Editor's Note:

This article is excerpted and edited from the Project Censored compilation "The Top 25 Censored Stories of 2016–2017". To see the full text with references and links, go to the web page <http://tinyurl.com/yaaj6nhq>. For more information and to purchase copies of the yearbook *Censored 2018: Press Freedoms in a "Post-Truth" World*, edited by Andy Lee Roth and Mickey Huff with Project Censored (Seven Stories Press, New York, October 2017), go to <http://www.projectcensored.org>.