The following is a full transcript of Episode 8 of the 2020 season of the Praxis Radio podcast. You can download it as a pdf here and listen/subscribe here.

Praxis Radio 2020 Podcast

Episode 8: Andy Lee Roth, Project Censored

<orchestral music intro, "Praxis Theme" by Jason Cross continues to play under narration>

Taylor, the host of the show: "Welcome listeners to a new installment of the 2020 season of Praxis. I'm back from a week off and very excited to share this episode with you. If you didn't notice I was gone, it probably means you aren't subscribed, which is embarrassing for everyone, but easy to remedy. You can do that and find past episodes, transcripts and more at www.praxisradio.com/subscribe. While the season has so far followed the trajectory of a radio show road trip I took 5 years ago through new interviews taken this past summer, today's interview is more recent, recorded just a couple of weeks ago in mid-November.

The two weeks before the break were rooted in the Bay Area, where I had also hoped to connect with Mickey Huff—the director of Project Censored—in person. We were able to do a short interview by phone and I am sorry to report that my setup in 2015 was not up to snuff …the audio quality is, well, kind of bad. It will not be lost to the ages though—I do plan to transcribe that interview and publish it on the site, as well as adding it to the show notes of this episode when it's ready.

I reached out to Project Censored's associate director, Andy Lee Roth, who you'll hear from today not for this season, but to let him know about the archive of the radio iteration of this show, on which he was a guest in 2013. I realized when he messaged me back about the new *State of the Free Press 2021* yearbook, that talking with him about this project again would be a great fit to revisit—even though we didn't meet on the road and he lives in my home state of Washington.

<music fades out>

The backdrop of everything we do as organizers or activists or artists lives in the sphere of media, and as existing corporate media structures mutate and metastasize through the power of big tech spread through the incomprehensibly vast vectors of social media, I think it's well worth a detour to go deeper into the news media. So without further ranting from me, here is my November 17th interview with Andy Lee Roth of Project Censored."

<Skype ring and connection sounds>

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): "Yeah, I guess just diving in, you're kind of a unique case on this series because this whole podcast series is an iteration of a radio show that I did for years, which you were on actually back in 2013 so you're unique in that way, too. But this is all revisiting a road trip that I took in the summer of 2015— which was quite a time— and I was trying to get back in touch with folks I met and interviewed then and I talked with not you, but your co-director of Project Censored where you also are, Mickey Huff. Yeah, and when he and I talked it was, you know, a similar time, but I feel like now it's more-so. Like all the seeds of the media landscape that we're in now, which is so extreme and unhinged, were really like falling on fertile ground in the summer of 2015. Would you agree with that?

Andy Lee Roth (ALR): "Yeah, yeah, I mean I think it's —the whole time I've been involved with the project, Project Censored, which is since about 2005, 2006, like, it's just nonstop, it's— there's always something going on and so, you know, on one hand it's relentless. On the other hand, like, if you're interested in these things you're— there's the proverbial never a dull moment. I think that the pressures that media organizations, that news organizations are under are as intense today as ever. The importance of the news media for setting an agenda and framing how the public understands the issues that society—American society— face are as high stakes as they've ever been and therefore the need for the public to be media literate, to have a critical media literacy, is as great as it's ever been. And again, all that I realize sounds a little bit self-serving since, you know, I— my training is as a sociologist of news media and the organization I work for, Project Censored, takes as its mission to inform people about the importance of truly independent journalism for democracy, but I believe in my heart that those things are all true.

TRW: Mmhmm, yeah. And I realize that in the rush to explain the context I did not introduce you. Would you like to introduce yourself? *<laughs>* You gave a little context for who you are, but just to share with listeners who we're hearing from?

ALR: Yeah, I'm Andy Roth and I think I'm newsworthy because I'm the associate director of an organization called Project Censored that has been around since 1976 operating as kind of one of the country's very first pioneering news watchdog organizations. And continuing on into the, you know, this new millennium and new decade as an organization that not only tries to inform the public about important news stories that are often underreported, ignored, or distorted by the corporate press, but also a major aim of the project and something that I'm very proud of is the hands-on direct education and critical media literacy that Project Censored provides to undergraduate students all across the United States.

So as we talk more today, Taylor, we'll be probably talking about some of the stories and themes that are in the project's newest yearbook—*State of the Free Press 2021*—and I'll just point out now, and I may try to reiterate in some more detail later, how many— how much of this book is originally researched and vetted by undergraduate students at a number of college and university campuses across the country where Project Censored's work is being done. So, yeah, my training is as a sociologist. I did my

doctorate in sociology at UCLA where I became interested in kind of the interactional factors that shape the production of news stories, which is a scholarly way of saying that all news is produced by human beings interacting with one another. And if we understand those processes, those processes of human interaction, between professional reporters, even not-professional reporters, between people who act as journalists and their sources, then we get a better picture of the world we live in because we understand how the news that we receive about it has been produced.

TRW: Hmm… that's a good lens to bring and I'm sure we will come back there. I think somewhere to start—maybe this has changed in the recent years, because people's awareness of the machinations of the news media I think has increased for— for good or ill— during the Trump years, but Project Censored, that's been the name. Can you talk about what y'all mean by censorship in that news landscape?

ALR: Yes.

TRW: Are we talking about hard censorship, or are we talking about other forms?

ALR: Yeah, I think— we are Project Censored, so that name is a name that Carl Jensen, the founder, gave the project. And Carl had a… had, as someone who came from a background not only in advertising, but also in journalism and eventually found his way into becoming a professor of sociology and communications, Carl had a flair for the dramatic. And so 'Project Censored' immediately raises questions—what's being censored? Who's censoring? Is there really censorship in the United States? Right?

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: You know and, and so I think we have— the project has had a revolving definition of what counts as censorship in the United States. And you know, I won't try to rehash a whole sociology of news history of censorship here, but we can run through a few elements to kind of cover the breadth of what we need to understand censorship as a concept, especially news censorship in the 21st century. So I'd start with of course, what everyone who's taken— who's kind of taken and remembers their civics classes— the First Amendment, of course, protects against governmental censorship and the United States you know, we can come back and we maybe want to talk more about governmental censorship in a moment, but I think if we're talking about, in the 21st century, the really new development is the consolidation and continued reinforcement of corporate power…

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: …which has been multiplied by online technologies in so many ways. So that a lot of what were talking about now and I think where the cutting edge of kind of these issues is today, is what you could think of as algorithmic censorship. But before talking about that, let me back up to the 1950s very quickly and just talk a little bit about one of the most famous studies of news judgment. A study done by a researcher by the name

of David Manning White who in 1950, published a study of what he called at the time 'gatekeeping'. The idea that the editor of the local newspaper was a kind of gatekeeper who controlled the gate and let some information pass through as news that would be published in the…in the Midwestern paper where this editor worked and other information would be rejected as not being newsworthy. And David Manning White spent months watching, looking at, the decisions that this wire editor— who he gave the pseudonym Mr. Gates to— looking at how Mr. Gates made decisions about what counted as news and what didn't. Ok. Fast forward seventy years. There are of course still editors at news organizations all over the country making decisions, but increasingly in terms of the news that we see every day, we're seeing it on platforms like Facebook or we're finding it through things like Google's news aggregator.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: There isn't a Mr. Gates, per se, anymore. What we have now are algorithms. Algorithms is— these basically computer programs, sets of procedures, that find a solution to a problem. When I ask for news about, you know, 'rabbits gone wild', what does Google tell me is the most relevant thing, right? Now the thing about these algorithms is that they're proprietary meaning that the companies that created them, being Facebook or Google, claim that they have exclusive rights to them, which means in effect that there can be no equivalent of a David Manning White observing and reporting decisions made by Mr. Gates. The algorithms are not available to public scrutiny and so when we talk about… so I think one of the ways we can talk about a kind of algorithmic censorship, or at least an algorithmic filtering of the news if you want to start from a more neutral standpoint, that's a relatively new development in news that we— I think you're quite right— I think in the last five to six years, there's been a lot more awareness in that we've had the development of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the publicizing of that, there's a lot more, kind of, awareness on many people's parts about how social media function as ways of monetizing our attention.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: But we still don't know, in part because it's impossible right now to know, the full extent of how these algorithms are filtering what we receive as news when we're operating in a platform like Google or Facebook.

TRW: Yeah, and I don't want to get too philosophical and spun out about this, but I'm really curious, what you were talking about with your sociology lens in studying this, both the corporatization of media and now the addition of artificial intelligence on top of that, how does that… I mean, is that still people? I mean, people, individual people, who are mostly of a certain demographic, being white, young, American men, built these algorithms…

ALR: Right.

TRW: …and run these corporations, but what does that mean for your kind of theoretical framework as a sociologist? Like are these not human systems anymore?

ALR: Well, I think they are. I mean, I think one of the kind of… one of the smokescreens there is that— and in some sense I'm guilty of it in what I… in my previous statement— we'll talk about the algorithms and we'll talk about AI, artificial intelligence, but of course those are all originally human creations, right? There's specific people, we don't know much about, say, the Google News aggregator algorithm, the algorithm that the Google News platform uses to determine what what news you receive, we don't know a lot about how it operates because it's proprietary, but it wasn't, you know, it was created by a group of people. And so I think it just… it just is a new version of an old problem which is understanding how— and thinking about it sociologically and kind of across historical periods—it's a new version of an old problem which is how does the news that we receive get produced, right?

And in this case, now we've added an intermediary step that is in effect non-human, it's technological, but that technology was created by humans and you know, I think there are developments afoot that it's possible that we might one day know much more about the manufacture of these things. But for the time being, what we do know is that these algorithms produce biased results and there seems to be… like this is always the problem if you're thinking sociologically and you're trying to make a causal argument: 'x, you know, condition x leads to outcome y'. We know… we know for instance that the Google News algorithm is biased. One example I'll just mention briefly— my colleague April Anderson and I earlier this year published an article, a brief article in the *Index on Censorship* about the censorship of LGBTQ issues, perspectives, and voices online on a variety of platforms and one of our…one of our arguments and the pieces of evidence in our argument about that is that the Google News aggregator is significantly biased in terms of what it returns to you as the top news stories of the day if you do a search on 'LGBT' and any of the variants of that acronym.

TRW: Hmm

ALR: So, we know on one hand that there is bias in the Google News aggregator when it comes, for instance, to giving you a representative sampling of the news of the day in terms of LGBTQ issues. On the other hand, we also know as kind of an empirical point of fact as you noted, that the people who work at these companies and operate these companies are not representative of the population as a whole, right? They…they are, you know, predominantly younger, well-educated, white, cisgender, likely heterosexual men and they carry with them all of the, you know, potentially carry with them all the biases— recognized or unrecognized— of those categorical identities. Now the trick is, I think sociologically is— so we have one set of conditions on the production side that we know about as a matter of fact. We have another set of conditions on the output side, right, the content that results.

The question is: what's going on between the conditions that give rise to the outcome and the outcome, right? How… and so we don't know, one of the things April Anderson

and I say, one of the things that we acknowledge in the *Index on Censorship* article about bias in Google's news aggregator, anti-LGBTQ bias in Google News aggregator is because of the proprietary nature of the algorithms, we don't know whether there are biases built into the algorithm itself, or whether those biases are the result of skillful manipulation by people who are homophobic or transphobic to make sure that their items come up far more frequently in Google News aggregator than messages and perspectives that are positive that are on LGBTQ issues in the community.

TRW: Yeah, and I think the issue of the lack of popular understanding of how this works, not only because of ignorance, but because we literally just don't have access to it. And, you know, some people have leaked things about the Facebook algorithm, there's been a few notable, you know, whistleblowers within Facebook, but these last hearings that we've seen, one being anti-trust so it really wasn't… it was supposed to be focused on that, but just watching representatives in government question these CEOs who are ultimately, you know, responsible for the actions of their companies, it really revealed I think to many people the extent to which folks in government don't understand this technology.

ALR: Mmhmm

TRW: Based on the questions they were asking or, you know, they are feigning a lack of understanding because they have a corporate interest in maintaining the power of these companies…

ALR: Uh huh

TRW: …but how do you think…how do you think we can get at more transparency from these companies or control over these platforms by a more democratic…?

ALR: Yeah, I would answer that I guess… I would answer that in two ways—in terms of working within the conditions that exist now and then working towards conditions that would be better than they are now. So on the first, within the existing conditions, I think something like what Project Censored champions, a kind of critical media literacy, and if my colleague April Anderson were in this conversation with us, too, I know April would immediately add in that that includes in effect being algorithmically literate, right?

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: So understanding that when you go to your Facebook feed, right, that something is making a decision about what posts you see and some of that has to do with sponsored content and some of that has to do with your network of Facebook connections, but those are being targeted to you in ways that we understand a little bit now, right, we've gotten kind of glimpses inside this, this hidden mechanism, right? But the more we can understand and the more we're aware that there is a filtering process going on now, just no longer consists of a Mr. Gates sitting at a desk deciding 'this is news', 'this isn't news'. Right? It's much more sophisticated and distributed now.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: I think that's… I think that's one. This is a critical media literacy that includes an understanding of how algorithms are increasingly powerful in shaping our lives and indeed our life chances, right? There's great work on this with regard to race by Safiya Umoja Noble whose book *Algorithms of Oppression* is very important. And April Anderson, my colleague, is working on research that I think is going to eventually be at the same kind of feature-length study in terms of algorithms and LGBTQ inequalities and exclusions. So that's, I think, one thing.

The other thing that April and I learned about when we wrote this article "Queer Erasure" for the *Index on Censorship,* one of the people that we talked to to prepare this article is a lawyer from the San Francisco Bay Area called Peter Obstler. And Peter Obstler was an interesting person for us to talk to because he is the… he is the lawyer representing a group of LGBTQ Youtube— content creators on Youtube— and this group of people is suing Youtube on the grounds that Youtube has restricted their access on the basis of their sexual orientations or gender identities and they identified a set of toolkits that Youtube has effectively used to do this. It includes things like content blocking, restrictions on advertisements, and channel demonetization.

This lawsuit, if it goes through, the stakes are huge. It's in some ways far bigger than the very important interests of the plaintiffs themselves. What they're going after in this case would be a public disclosure or a semi-public disclosure of the algorithms that are used to determine the content. And so when I talk about a vision of, like, what might be different in the future, whether it's through legal means, or whether it's through whistleblowers and other figures, I think as we come to learn more about these, we will — we will have gained a better understanding of this core issue of again, what are the social factors that shape the news we receive today, right?

TRW: Mmhmm. Just to…I kind of want to get off the tech companies in a minute BUT the the idea that there's not a Mr. Gates now, I think is true. And also, one of the stories in the book is about police officers being—the headline is 'Police Officers Implicated in Online Hate Groups As Facebook Profits'

ALR: Mmhmm

TRW: …and I think the '…As Facebook Profits' is like, a thesis for a lot of what has happened in…

<laughter>

TRW: …in the hate-o-sphere online, um…

ALR: Uh huh

TRW: The issue is that what we do know about their algorithm is that controversy drives engagement and controversial content has, you know, spawned a gigantic dangerous cult [QAnon] among other outcomes. So I mean, do you think that we could see it that way? In that Mark Zuckerberg as Mr. Gates in this example in that, like, he just wants Facebook to be the most powerful company in the world and he wants to be a tech emperor? You know, that it's like, kind of a value-neutral thing and that the expectation that somehow these tech CEOs are going to be ethical arbiters of information is just… kind of a strange idea?

ALR: Mmhmm… I mean it's my…I guess it's my— I would frame it as my personal opinion, and therefore something that I couldn't prove in the same way that I can tell you we know for a fact that the Google News aggregator discriminates against LGBTQ content, I would put it as a personal opinion—it's my opinion that Zuckerberg is simply in way over his head, that he's created something that he doesn't understand the full power and implications of it. And you know, I won't go more into that, I don't think… at some level, I don't think it matters what Zuckerberg…

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: …does or doesn't understand. I think what matters is that Facebook as an entity, Facebook as a corporation, right, is driven by market logic. And so, you know, referring back to that story, the 'Police Officers Implicated in Online Hate Groups As Facebook Profits' is one of our top 25 most important but underreported stories for the past year. One element of that story is a report from *Sludge* by Alex Kotch from September of last year that Facebook has profited from promoting hate groups' contents and he— the *Sludge* study of Facebook ad data which is available found that between May of 2018 and September of 2019, there were thirty-eight hate groups, or hate figures or political campaigns representing those figures or groups, that had paid Facebook 1.6 million dollars to place more than 4,900 sponsored ads. So that is a, like, a straightforward, like — that's not behind any kind of proprietary screen, right? With the right kind of Freedom of Information [Act] requests and investigative reporting, you know, Kotch was able to document that as a matter of fact. So you know, again, I think there's, you know, these organizations operate in market contexts where they are compelled to pursue profits and I think the challenge that I'm not sure whether the Congress is up to the challenge, is to [make] a determination about what is the status of an entity like Facebook, right?

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: And I don't… I don't have I think any deep insights into that debate other than that the debate over whether Facebook is simply a tech company or whether they perform something like a journalistic role and therefore are responsible to some of the journalistic standards and ethics that we know and hold dear— that debate is important, but it hasn't been played out very effectively I would say.

TRW: Yeah and it's complicating that… the next thing that I wanted to talk about, which is the issue of…of fake news. And I think that's the lens through which many Americans

who don't pay attention to, you know, media theory recreationally, that was their gateway into understanding this more. But also this issue, you know, the exact thing you just mentioned, like what are these companies, what's their role? I think if we can't slow down and solve that, it's going to be very complicated because as fake news became buzzy and as certain figures started being deplatformed and demonetized on the left and the right, kind of across the spectrum, the corporate media's gatekeeping became more formal and I want to share a quote from, from…it's from Matt Taibbi's intro to the new book…

ALR: Mmhmm

TRW: …talking about fake news and this idea of 'who checks the fact checkers?'. So he said, 'Even more alarming, perhaps, in a May 2020 'Here to Help' feature on recognizing false information in online feeds, *The New York Times* audaciously advised its readers that, if they have never heard of the outlet that published an article, 'there's a good chance that it exists solely to publish fake news.' The feature further advised that, if a questionable story's contents were 'legitimately outrageous,' then 'plenty of other news outlets would have written about it, too.'" So that's…troubling *<laughs>* and …

ALR: And that's… and that's from *The New York Times,* right?

TRW: Yes.

ALR: And so the interesting thing about that story, that *New York Times* 'Here to Help' feature— when that came out, I clipped a copy of it from the actual print version of the paper and thought… I do that sometimes when I want to remind myself, 'hey, this is something, you know, tuck this away for use in the next censored yearbook'.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: But I usually assume it's there to remind me until I can find it online and then, you know, it's a matter of bookmarking it online on my browser and I can find it whenever I want. That article never appeared online. I wonder if *The New York Times* didn't get some flak in addition to what's in our yearbook about the poor judgment demonstrated there. But I think, I think that, you know, if you're thinking about today versus 2015, right, let's step back and take a bigger picture at fake news. There's always been concern for fake news, right? Throughout history, kind of fake news has been an influential and dangerous force, but the difference between today and 2015 is that in those five years, fake news has been weaponized, primarily by President Trump, it's been weaponized as a tool, right?

Trump has infamously used it to dismiss not just particular stories that he disagrees with, but to— but to discredit reporters and entire news organizations as fake news. And that, I think, is behind, that's what's driven some of the kind of enhanced status of our concern for fake news today and I think there are a couple things to say about that. One is it's always been a problem and in some sense, for those of us at Project Censored

and those of us that have followed the project's work, it's like, 'oh finally a bunch more people are coming around to see the significance, the importance of understanding some of the things that we've been talking about for forty-some years', right?

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: So there's that level. The other thing, and we write—Mickey Huff and I write about this a little bit in the introduction to *State of the Free Press 2021,* the new Project Censored yearbook is that many of the current proposals to address fake news are originating from the very people and organizations that have helped to produce and spread it in the first place, right? So whether we're talking about government agencies or officials, private industry, the tech companies we've been talking about, or political parties, right, some of the very people who are now, the very people and organizations who are now keen to present themselves as arbiters of what counts as real news and what we need to be, you know, censoring as fake news, are themselves… you know, it's a bit of the you know, 'don't throw bricks when you live in a glass house'.

Um, so to take one concrete example, NewsGuard is one of the kind of entities that has risen and been embraced by much of the corporate media as sort of a trustworthy judge of fake news. But if you dig a little, as Mickey Huff and I write about in the introduction to *State of the Free Press 2021*, if you dig a little, what you find is that the advisory board for NewsGuard consists of a bunch of former government officials who very tidily fit kind of the establishment news media's standard, but very narrow, definition of who's a newsworthy actor or who's a newsworthy perspective or source on the day's events. So these are people like Tom Ridge who's the first Director of Homeland Security for the U.S., he's one of the advisory figures on the NewsGuard advisory board. Another is Michael Hayden who ran the CIA when George W. Bush was the president.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: And I think… so you can look at this as kind of wolves guarding the henhouse, here, right? The answer, like, who checks the fact checkers? Well, these are people who I think any media literate person, any kind of critical thinker might say, 'wait a minute, these people are not disinterested parties who are just interested in providing a… kind of a good, clear, transparent, trustworthy news to us. These are people who have serious ties and investments in the status quo power structures of this country'. So the idea that they're the ones who are going to judge what is fake news or not is, to me, inherently ideological and like ultimately, I think NewsGuard is—although the aim of what they're trying to do is noble—the way they're doing it I think amounts to kind of more black smoke. It's more smog that distorts our understanding, that distorts our clear vision of what's actually going on.

TRW: Yeah, yeah, and this whole process would seem to create a really troubling feedback loop in which— whether it's these CIA folks being in control of NewsGuard or whether it's just the general, like, smug tone of *The New York Times*— the people who are, you know, the people who are being duped by fake news are going to see that and

be like, 'look, *The New York Times* is…doesn't care about me'. Or you know, 'these people are…you know, it *is* all a conspiracy' and rather than gaining the critical thinking skills and the news analysis skills you were talking about— and I hope we'll talk about more— people just might go further down a rabbit hole of you know, whether it's conspiracy theory, like whole cloth lies or just like, odd distortions of real information.

ALR: Yeah, I mean I think this is a good time to just—I'll put in a shameless plug here for a new book that's not the censored yearbook, but is a book by a close ally of Project Censored, Nolan Higdon, who published earlier this year a book called *The Anatomy of Fake News,* but the subtitle is wonderful and it's wonderful because this is what the book does, it's *A Critical News Literacy Education.* And so the last chapter of the book, after Nolan deftly takes the reader through a history of fake news and, as I mentioned earlier, all the ways that across kind of, you know, American history, governments, private industry, political parties and others have tried to—tried to you know, dupe the public in one way or another.

Nolan's book, *The Anatomy of Fake News,* ends with a ten-point fake news detection kit and he— the point he makes is that, it's a point he makes based on work done by another colleague of ours, Allison Butler, who makes the point that we have to reframe our sense of who we are, right? We tend to think and the language we often use is that we're consumers of media, right? We're like, and I think that consuming metaphor is very powerful in lots of ways, because I think our health as people depends on the news we consume much the way it depends on the food we consume, but Allison Butler in this book, *The Anatomy of Fake News* [by] Nolan Higdon, argues that we need to think of ourselves not as media consumers, but as media citizens, right? And so, when you're confronted with news that seems incredible, right, in the literal sense of that term, news that might not be credible, news that we might, you know, want to label 'fake news', you know, some of the things that we can do are ask ourselves, you know, 'should I react to this?', or 'should I investigate it further?'

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: Ask yourself, 'why was my attention drawn to this story?', right? If you're getting worked up about it, what made that happen? And then, though this gradually becomes more analytic I think and some of Nolan's recommendations are: 'does the evidence hold up under scrutiny?' Right? So once we've noted our reactions, you can start looking for the things that basic critical thinking skills alert us to, you know, false dilemmas, circular reasoning, ad hominem and straw man arguments. And I'm not going to try to go through the whole ten-point detection kit now, but just one more that I really think is brilliant is: 'what's missing from the story?', right? And in some ways that's where Project Censored's work comes in. And I think that's a fundamental question that people interested in news should always be asking is, is: ok, if this story frames this story for me this way—and I'm thinking of a frame, I'm holding up my hands as I'm saying this like the frame of a window—right? If this news story frames this story this way, it's highlighting some things, right, the things in the middle of the frame, but there's things outside the frame that may be important too, right? And so asking 'what's missing

from the story?', 'what's outside the frame?'. Though of course, that hinges on recognizing there's a frame in the first place. But I think those are sort of critical things that in a general way begin to orient us and give us a firm ground from which to assess 'should I trust this story or not?'.

TRW: Yeah and that… so that idea of the frame, the 'what's missing?' question is so crucial, you know, and that kind of goes to this idea that I love now that I've read it from your other former director, Peter Phillips, this idea of news abuse. And I might just actually read the way it's described in the book if that's ok because it will be more eloquent than me: "News Abuse' is a term coined nearly twenty years ago by former Project Censored director, sociologist Peter Phillips, who saw that it was important to understand how corporate media not only ignore crucial stories, but spin and frame news in ways that distract, distort, and sensationalize reporting. In addition, by employing interpretive frames, media serve to present familiar narratives that fit seamlessly into official, establishment positions that shape and alter the significance of global events. Phillips understood that without historical context, crucial perspectives, or meaningful follow-up reporting, corporate news produced a subtle yet sophisticated form of propaganda, and he called the practice 'News Abuse." So, I want to talk about that just a little bit more with you, I've been particularly aware of it during election season, which is just a time that I hate…

<laughter>

TRW: …as someone who's interested in like, social movement politics and a broader politics. And I've been also listening to like, *The New York Times' [The] Daily* podcast, things outside of my normal media diet, just to see what's going on out there and the news abuse is…is real *<laughs>* in the election, you know? I don't know, I guess I'm just curious your observations on that…

ALR: Yeah…

TRW: …the weird amnesia that seems to be part of it, the same hand-wringing about 'how could the polls be so wrong?'. It's just regurgitated.

ALR: Yeah I think, I think, yeah. So that's a rich, rich topic we could probably do a whole interview on, so I'll try to hit a few highlights and then point people to where they can learn a bit more about this if they are interested. I think if we're talking about news abuse as part of this framing process, right, and how the frame can take a serious issue and distort its significance in a way that undermines the public's ability to understand and ultimately to engage effectively, I think one of the things that's just fundamental— and this isn't original to me by any means— but the critique of news coverage of elections as horse race coverage, right?

TRW: Hmm

ALR: Where the coverage of the campaign for any elected official, especially presidents in this country, is a matter of who's ahead and by how much, right, so it's like a horse race. So-and-so's winning, but their lead is shrinking, right? So the news becomes the election itself rather than the issues that the election is supposedly a referendum on. That's a kind of generic point and I think that is a frame that kind of often leads to news abuse in the sense that Peter Phillips first conceived it. Thinking about the… if we go back from the recently completed and still, you know, we're still in the rough wake of the presidential election, but if we go back to the primaries. The… Robin Anderson, who's a professor of communications and media studies at Fordham University in New York wrote this year's chapter on news abuse in the *State of the Free Press 2021* book and one of the things, one of the topics that Robin deftly analyzes as an exemplar of news abuse is the coverage of Bernie Sanders presidential campaign in the Democratic primary.

And just think, I'll just point to this and then say if this is interesting, you might want to check out Robin Anderson's analysis in the book, but just think for a minute about how notions of 'electability', how electability became the frame by which the news media proposed— the news media and pundits all across the spectrum began proposing— that we evaluate candidates. Now of course, winning, you know, elections like horse races are about who gets there first with the most, but the notion that that concept of electability I think was a new development in the …kind of in this year's campaign cycle. And I think it worked in ways, as Robin Anderson analyzes, it worked in ways that amounted to what you could think of as news abuse.

TRW: Mmhmm… cause one would think that in a primary, the determinant of electability would be allowing people to vote between the maximum amount of folks in the primary?

ALR: Mmhmm, mhmmm, right, right. So just that concept of electability as a frame, right? Think of it as— of course elections are about, you know, winning and getting the most votes— but the way that concept electability worked is…the crux or is a crux issue. But in general it's important to point out, just for context for people who may not be as familiar with Project Censored's work, that news abuse is kind of the twin concept of another concept that the project championed that Carl Jensen, the founder of Project Censored, actually coined the term ' junk food news'. And junk food news stories as they're kind of… and news abuse are kind of twins in the sense that junk food news stories are the stories that the corporate media spin off and wow us with where the stories are truly frivolous. They don't inform us, or engage us as citizens or community members. So things like what celebrities are doing during quarantine and the pandemic are quintessential junk food news stories as we have analysis of in the book in the chapter by Izzy Snow and Susan Rahman and students at the College of Marin in California.

And so news abuse is sort of the counterpart. It's stories that are genuinely important, but the way they're reported, the way they're framed, distorts our understanding. And I think, you know, there's a lot of evidence to show— for instance *In These Times* did a really fascinating study during the Democratic primary to show how much more

coverage Biden got than Sanders or… or Warren got as evidence of kind of a corporate bias. So it's not just that they're covering it as a horse race, but they're covering it as a rigged horse race, or a horse race that they had a hand in rigging.

TRW: Yeah…I want to say that the number from, cause it's cited in the book as well, I want to say that the number was…it was three-to-one…

ALR: Yeah…

TRW: …the coverage of Biden to Sanders.

ALR: …and that's a stunning discrepancy.

TRW: And then when you add the frame that that Sanders coverage was probably hemming and hawing about whether he's…

ALR: His electability!

TRW: …too radical etc, yeah. So aside from that, I mean, you talked about this a bit, but I'm curious about the process. Um, I think all the fake news talk and especially coming from Trump you know, demonizing journalists, the ways that the media is kind of obfuscated for a lot of people, not knowing what the process is. Can you talk a little bit about the process that the students who are part of Project Censored, the rest of the team, use to vet your stories, to find your stories and how might that trickle out to average people kind of doing their own seeking of reliable sources?

ALR: Yeah I think that there's a… the review and vetting process is definitely translatable, adaptable, to people just sitting at home and thinking about it because the foundation of it is ultimately—we use a little bit of technology, we use some online databases— but most of it is critical thinking skills. So just to kind of background, the top 25 list comes, is the result of an annual, year-long process. This year some over 300 students from nineteen different college and university campuses helped us identify and vet candidate stories resulting in this years top 25 list. For people who are interested in some of the stories that we vetted positively, that we found to be important and well-reported, but that aren't in the top 25, you can go to the Project Censored website which is projectcensored.org and look for Validated Independent News and there's several hundred stories. Each year we post several hundred stories there.

When we vet those stories, obviously we're looking for— the stories need to be important, the stories, so they can't be, you know, frivolous stories; they need to be well-reported, which is to say they're transparently sourced and factually grounded and they sort of, for stories that make the top 25 list, they need to be stories that have not been adequately covered in the corporate news media. So thinking about how those things translate, I would say there are a few things that people can do. This is something I love having students in my sociology courses do. We take a news story and we look at who's quoted in the story and to get to the big picture, right, look at who's quoted with the idea

that the question of the quality of the news hinges to some degree on the diversity of perspectives represented.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: Right? So if you look at a news story and see, and I'll give an example here in a moment, and you see that a very narrow range of people and perspectives are quoted, that news story is, in my opinion, weaker, less useful, less informative than a story that looks at the same issue but quotes sources from a wider range of perspectives. Let me give an example from the top 25 in this year's book. One of our top stories is how Monsanto created an intelligence center that it used to target journalists and activists who had been critical of Monsanto and especially its Roundup project, Roundup product that uses [glyphosate]—sorry I'm stumbling on my words here

TRW: No, you got it.

ALR: That story was, as we reported, was originally reported in by *The Guardian* in August of 2019, but as students who were looking at that story vetted it, they found there had been very limited corporate news coverage. But one of the stories that they found, an ABC News story from June of 2019 was very interesting on this issue of who's quoted. ABC's coverage of the Monsanto intelligence center basically emphasized the perspective of Monsanto and its parent company, Bayer. ABC quoted only Bayer officials, including the company head of corporate communications and its chairman of the board, and the only person who wasn't a Bayer official quoted in that in ABC report on the intelligence centers, was a statement by from the PR firm FleishmanHillard, that represents Monsanto. That basically said, 'look, Monsanto's not doing anything different than what every other corporation in the world does'. So, on one hand you could say, 'hey, wait a minute, guys at Project Censored, there was corporate news coverage of that story'. But this kind of gets at two things—it gets at what's missing from the story, if you… if you just read…

<Siren barely audible in background>

ALR: There come the Monsanto intelligence center people to get us, I hear the siren. Um, if you just look at the ABC coverage, and that was your sole source of information about Monsanto and its intelligence center, you might conclude, 'hey, it's standard practice, everyone does it, you know, corporations are always monitoring for security risks to their work. No harm, no foul.' Right? But if you saw other articles that quoted other sources as Sam Levine's article in *The Guardian* did, then you would get the perspective of people like Dave Maass from the Electronic Frontier Foundation who, when he's quoted in the article about this says, 'what Monsanto is doing is going way beyond standard security practices, they're actively targeting and making plans to undermine the credibility of people who have spoken out about problems with Roundup.'

And so there's a very different perspective there. So you can look at who's quoted, right? A question of diversity of perspectives, is there a range of perspectives? If it's a

civil liberties issue, are only government officials quoted, right? And so one way, one way I think that you often get a false sense of diversity of perspective in the news is an article will, say on use of weaponized drones in other countries—US weaponized drones—an article might quote both a Republican and a Democrat…

<laughter>

ALR: …and that looks like perspective, right? Hey, we've got a liberal view and a conservative view and they both seem to say like, 'well, you know, some of the technology, the ethics are still catching up to the technology, but overall this is still better than the loss of lives involved in boots on the ground'. And you can say, 'oh, well diversity of perspectives, right?' We've got a Republican and a Democrat. But both of them are, say, taking money from the lobbying of corporations that produce drones, so is that really diversity of perspective? It looks like it if you only focus on political affiliation, political party affiliation, but if you think about it in other ways it's not.

TRW: Yeah

ALR: So I think looking at who's quoted and I love, it's a very simple concept, but it's a very powerful one, the sociologist Herb Gans in 1979 wrote a book called *Deciding What's News* and he studied— for months and months he studied the newsrooms of some of the biggest news magazines, newspapers, and network news outlets and he concluded by saying that what we need is multi-perspectival news, right? The ways in which news is biased can often be tracked back to a lack of multiple perspectives. So um… I think about like, look at who's quoted in the story and ask yourself, 'is this multi-perspectival?' You don't have to read Gans' study to do that.

TRW: And even if you can't find a direct source of someone whose family was killed by a drone strike in Yemen—which you can find—but you can at least imagine, like, 'oh that's who were not hearing from'.

ALR: Mmhmm, exactly.

TRW: Or the nineteen year old kid from Iowa who's piloting these drones you know, any of the other people involved.

ALR: Right, so those would be instances of like, if you had a perspective of a person in that role, the news story would be more robust, I think. The news story would provide something closer to a multi-perspectival view on that issue. Another great example, and I won't go into detail on this, but at the outset, in 2003 before the United States began to attack Iraq, Dahr Jamail who had no background as a reporter decided that he needed to get there on the ground to find out what was going to happen. And unlike all these other reporters who were embedded with U.S. military units, Dahr Jamail went there on his own. He hired a driver and a translator and he went and talked to ordinary people. The guy who owns the shop on the corner, the mother of the children who are playing in the courtyard. And the reports that Dahr sent back from Iraq, from Baghdad, in early

2003 were so radically different from anything that was anywhere in the kind of establishment media at the time. And it was all because, you know, at risk to his life, Dar Jamail had gone and created, kind of provided, multi-perspectival news on what the invasion, what the bombing and invasion of Iraq looked like at the ground level.

TRW: Yeah, I was able to talk to him last year and now he's doing really wonderful, in-depth, independent climate work.

ALR: Yes, I mean he's continued to just be… he's a person who I think of as an exemplar of what it means to be an independent investigative reporter and he's just a really good person, too.

TRW: Yeah. This is probably a good time for me to mention too, for folks listening, that I'm linking every—everything that's been dropped in the show notes underneath, so if you've been trying to like, scramble to write things down on scraps of paper or whatever… don't put it in your notes app while you're driving, it's in the show notes.

ALR: A couple more lessons that I think from the vetting process that can be translated directly to folks who want to kind of feel like they're more proactive— like they're media citizens rather than passive media consumers—track data back to the original source. Right? So track back to the, you know, if someone, if a news story says, 'well, a report found x', oftentimes if you're reading online, there will be a hyperlink right there that you can follow. Maybe there's not though, but you can still be a little more proactive and this is a wonderful age in which to be a critical consumer of news because if you have an internet connection, you can dig pretty hard without, you know, without wearing off the soles of your shoes walking all over the place to find things. So tracking back to the original sources, we have students do that all the time as an elementary component of their evaluation of the trustworthiness of the story. Does the reporter accurately convey what the original source reported? And the last one that I would add just in terms of not trying to overwhelm people now, but one that I think is incredibly important and you can think of Monsanto intelligence center as an example of this. Compare different stories on the same topic, right?

TRW: Yeah

ALR: It can be hard to see slant in isolation, it can be hard to see, whatever you want to call it, slant, bias, you know, news abuse, it can be hard to see it in isolation. Pretty much any story that you read in *The New York Times* is going to be incredibly well written. And it is going to be, to a great degree, factually documented. But we're back to the question that we were talking about earlier of the framing.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: Right? And the framing will be easier to see if you compare say, *The New York Times* coverage of that story with something from say, *Mother Jones* on the same topic, or—I'm picking examples not totally at random—

TRW: Sure

ALR: …but I don't mean to put *Mother Jones* on a pedestal and *The New York Times* in the doghouse.

<laughter>

ALR: But just as exemplars of corporate and independent news reporting. And if you look at stories side by side, then it becomes easier to see for instance, 'wow, there's a real difference between who's quoted in this story and who's quoted in that story.' Or you can see, for instance, that *The New York Times* reported about how journalists around the world are at risk for doing their work because they're increasingly— and this has been magnified under covid, right, attacks on journalistic freedom in the United States— but you won't appreciate the fullness of that story until you compare *The New York Times* coverage with say, some independent coverage that not only reports how journalists around the world are under attack, but also a potential solution. And this is, this was one of our top 25 stories a handful of years ago.

A student of mine researched this story and we ultimately ran that story after the student had thought for a minute that it might be, it might be in effect for the top 25, a dead story because it had been covered in *The New York Times*. But when the student looked more closely, what she found was 'oh *The New York Times* didn't talk at all about some of the solutions that were in the works' in terms of of mechanisms through international agencies to hold governments accountable when journalists in their country were subject to jail or violence in the line of work.

TRW: Hmm

ALR: And so *The New York Times* reported on the dangers that the journalists face, but left out a crucial component of the story—mechanisms that might lead to…to if not a complete solution to that problem, at least a reduction, a mitigation of the risks that journalists face in the line of doing their work. So that was a case where comparing the story revealed crucial differences between the coverage provided by the corporate news outlet and an independent news outlet.

TRW: Just in the service of winding down, I'm— I feel like there's so much stuff we could just keep talking about forever, but I'm curious… this is kind of a fluffy question, but also not. Since the book is— we should mention that the book is coming out tomorrow if you're listening on the release date, it's coming out December 1st, 2020— you can find it, you can request it at your indie bookseller or go to projectcensored.org are the best ways I believe, but do you have a favorite story? Do you have like, a story from this year's yearbook that…

ALR: A darling?

TRW: …you want to highlight that you haven't?

ALR: A darling, a darling.

TRW: A darling, yes.

ALR: A darling story. Yes, I do. I have several darlings. One of our very top stories and something that I— I feel very strongly about, so its not my favorite in terms of I'm happy about this, but one of our very top stories that I'm very proud that Project Censored and our judges voted to make this one of our very, very top stories is the story of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls in the United States. And that story is, yeah, I think its just very important and it's one that, in a year where we've had a lot of concern about violence in this country, it's a story that nonetheless has been very marginal in terms of the corporate news media's attention. And I think that there's a lot that we can learn from digging into the details of that story about how the news media work, but also there's I think a tremendous sense of how, how far we have to go to heal long standing wounds of of systemic racial inequality and violence in this country.

TRW: Mmhmm

ALR: So that's one I would point to, but I don't want to end on a…I don't want to end on such a hard note. I think the other thing that I would say is that, you know, the importance of positive news stories. And I won't, you know, we have a handful of those in this year's top 25 list and people can find that list even if you don't get hold of the book. You can find the top 25 list published on the Project Censored website and you can look at the list for positive news stories and I think thats an area where—it's another area where [there is] serious bias in terms of corporate news coverage, a bias against covering substantively positive news stories. And by that I don't mean like, the cat trapped at the top of the tree that gets rescued by the firefighters that come…

TRW: *<laughs>* Yeah.

ALR: …but I mean positive news stories, stories of communities coming together in solidarity to solve problems that they face. And I would here point people— it's actually part of what Project Censored does, we point people to other people's work— and I would say that for people who sometimes feel bummed out about the news and that the news is hard to accept or hard to digest because so much of it is so negative, the Solutions Journalism Network is a fantastic organization and they have online the Solutions Story Tracker which allows you to browse by substantive area, issue areas, and success factors. You can browse for stories that are positive news stories, that are high quality news stories, they fit all the criteria that we talk about and they, you know, they don't necessarily discriminate as Project Censored does between independent and corporate news, but they're, for people who want a more positive kind of stream of news, who sometimes feel like, you know, you get burnt out on the relentless negative news, the Solutions Story Tracker. And then some of the stories that we— each year we work with our judges, we don't massage the results of the voting, but we try to

encourage the judges to… to not only look at the stories that sort of make us go, 'oh my god'

TRW: Uh huh

ALR: But also the stories that we go, 'yeah, thats right, bring it!' and so, yeah those are, I think, important stories as well, right? That they're important because they show us alternative models about what's possible and that's very important if you want, as I think we all do, a better, more inclusive, more just future.

TRW: I always try to get people to end on a hopeful note without being trite and you just kind of did it on your own, so, well done. Before we wrap up, is there anything you want to make sure to add, and are there any plugs you want to plug that we haven't hit?

ALR: I think, you know, people can find, find as you mentioned, *State of the Free Press 2021* from Project Censored at the Project Censored website, at— in independent bookstores, we love it when people ask for or find our book in an independent bookstore, and you can get it direct from our stalwart publisher, the independent Seven Stories Press out of New York City. You can go to their website, too. We're super proud of the book, the book is a labor of love and the last thing I would say, Taylor, is just thanks so much for the work that you do. It's this kind of grassroots, you know, journalism and… and public affairs programming that I think we need more and more of, that I think people are super hungry for and so thank you, it's a pleasure to spend time in conversation with you.

TRW: Well, thanks.

ALR: And folks who listen to your show, I hope they think about reaching out and expressing your thanks if you, if this kind of programming enriches your understanding, or stirs your fire, you know, it's crucial work, I believe. And it's this kind of work that gives me hope for, as I was saying a moment ago, a better future, a more inclusive, more just future.

TRW: Well shucks, thanks. I feel the same about you guys.

<music fades in>

TRW: I'm so glad we were able to talk and to talk for this long.

ALR: Yeah, thank you very much, Taylor."

TRW: Yeah, thank you."

TRW: "Thanks again to Andy and Mickey and everyone at Project Censored for doing this important work to interrogate and demystify the systems and people that bring us the information that informs our actions. And thanks to you all for listening. Again,

everything we mentioned and referenced in the interview is below in the show notes, along with a transcript of the episode. Please do subscribe, support, share with a friend, and feel free to contact me with show ideas and questions. You can do all of that by going to praxis radio.com that's p-r-a-x-i-s-r-a-d-i-o and clicking on Praxis. Next week, we head further out, following a lead from a past guest to a wonderful interview and visiting a variety of visionary alternative spaces and projects found along the way. See you then."

<music fades out>

END