

"Project Censored, founded thirty-eight years ago, . . . has evolved into a deep, wide, and utterly engrossing exercise to unmask censorship, self-censorship, and propaganda in the mass media."

—RALPH NADER, from the foreword

"Project Censored continues to do the work they've been persistently pursuing since 1976: Exposing the secrets that those in power would prefer to keep hidden and the corruption that should be scandalous, but isn't, because the corporate media won't cover it."

—DAVID ROVICS, musician and activist

"This is a timely moment for Project Censored's annual yearbook."

—Publishers Weekly on Censored 2015

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- US MEDIA HYPOCRISY IN COVERING UKRAINE CRISIS
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SERVICE LEARNING ON CAMPUS WITH PROJECT CENSORED
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COVER ART: Josh MacPhee

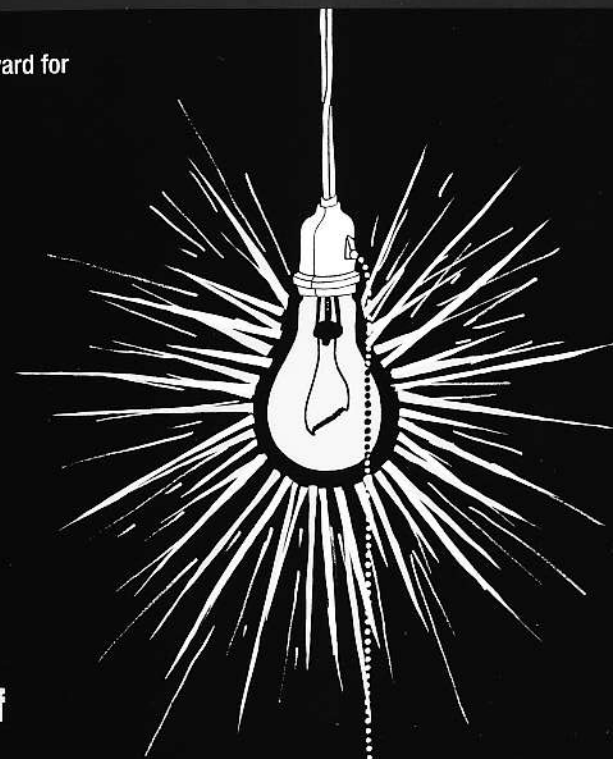
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SEVEN STORIES

Service Learning

The SUNY–Buffalo State and Project Censored Partnership

Michael I. Niman

Recent exposés have documented the exploitation of college student interns: some internships, during which unpaid students essentially take the place of paid employees—performing mundane tasks rather than engaging in pedagogically fruitful and intellectually challenging activities and thus gaining nothing of value—are a legally dubious form of exploitation. Other internships have unprepared (and often unsupervised) students arrive at workplaces as if they were going to a class, or acquiring skills while supervisors train them, but ultimately fail to have the students provide anything in return to their host institutions. The ideal internship experience is symbiotic, where a student's skills and intellectual horizons both grow, while the host organization benefits from an ongoing dynamic relationship with a university or college.

In recent years, this relationship often manifests not just as internships, where individual students venture out onto job sites, but as service learning courses, where entire classes, including their professors, are wed to host organizations, integrating a collaborative work enterprise into the day-to-day classroom experience. The State University of New York (SUNY) Faculty Senate differentiates service learning from both simple volunteerism and complex internships. Volunteerism, they point out, like service learning, requires a commitment to help others. Service learning, however, like a good internship, is also “focused on specific educational outcomes for those who do such service.” As such, the experience is symbiotic for both the host and the students.

Unlike an internship experience, service learning is tightly integrated within a specific course environment, involving not just students, but the seasoned expertise of a professor as well. In this way, service learning projects also promote “public scholarship,” answering the call for professors to move beyond the academy and engage with communities so that public service projects benefit directly from their expertise. This is especially important for public institutions, most of which have public service as a central tenet of their mission statements.

SUNY–Buffalo State, as SUNY’s largest comprehensive college and the only one centrally situated in an urban environment, has emerged as a leader in service learning. Our mission to serve our community, our location adjacent to a dynamic, culturally rich neighborhood that currently is home to a large population of refugees and migrants—from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America—and our location in a large border city adjacent to a rich agricultural area, have all provided us with many opportunities for service learning collaborations with not-for-profit community advocacy organizations.

Buffalo State also houses SUNY’s largest journalism program. While our community is rich with service learning opportunities, there is nothing on the ground here—or anywhere for that matter—quite like Project Censored. Though Project Censored is physically situated, legally chartered, and academically hosted in California, the reality is that the breadth and depth of Project Censored’s reach is global: on the web, and in bookstores both nationally and internationally. Though I’ve traveled to California to attend a Project Censored Awards Ceremony, as well as to attend a Project Censored conference, I’ve never seen or been to a Project Censored office, though I have it on good authority that such a thing exists. There is no iconic Project Censored building or campus, just like there’s no Free Speech Valley in California. I’ve met with Project Censored folks not only in California, but also at conferences and meetings scattered around the continent. Project Censored, like the censorship that it exposes, is everywhere, while being nowhere specific. So, I thought, why couldn’t it be in my city, on my campus, and in my classroom, mingling with my students, just as I’ve mingled with Project Censored activists around the continent and online?

Traditionally, Service Learning is intertwined with notions of community—of connecting academic communities with physical communities, creating a mutually beneficial relationship. That’s the history, but it’s also a short history, as the concept of course-integrated service learning has barely been around for two decades. During this time, both the Internet as a whole and social media specifically have challenged our commonly accepted concepts of community, with anthropologists and sociologists doing ethnographic fieldwork in digital spaces. Of course, the concept of community has long transgressed physical space, with diasporas and ideological communities as old as human migration. Investigative reporters and members of the alternative press, with our unique struggles and sometimes-shared experiences of oppression, are clearly a community. And the Internet has allowed me to bring this community into my classroom as a dynamic presence.

This is the argument I constructed when, as a SUNY Service Learning Fellow, I petitioned to make my Alternative Media course at SUNY–Buffalo State a service learning course with Project Censored as my partner. I was surprised to learn that nobody else had previously proposed this and that, as with other new service learning partnerships, we’d be in uncharted territory. The idea, it turned out, made perfect sense to both the Project Censored staff and to the Buffalo State Office of Volunteer and Service Learning. So off we sailed, testing the water with what Project Censored and I termed a “pilot project.”

Another major difference between an internship and service learning in the SUNY system is that, as the SUNY Faculty Senate puts it, “internships are structured experiences in a discipline” that “require a sequence of prior courses and a knowledge base for student success.” By comparison, “service learning does not assume a ladder of prior courses or developed skills; students at any level can engage in this pedagogy.” The theory is that the tightly integrated participation of a professor would make up for the lack of experience on the part of the students, allowing students to engage in real-world professional experiences at an earlier stage in their academic tracks. As a result, students who participate successfully in these classes gain self-esteem and intellectual maturity, are less likely to drop out or trans-

fer, and are more likely to become engaged in other community or campus activities. Service learning course veterans also tend to take subsequent courses more seriously, maintaining higher grade point averages, better positioning themselves for grad school or professional employment.

With most censored stories now originating in the alternative press, my theory was that, in searching for censored stories to validate, my students would become familiar with another world of media. Hence, this seemed like an ideal match for an alternative media course. What I didn't expect, going into this project, was that only two out of twenty-three students would have had any exposure to what we would term "alternative media." Some seemed to have little, if any, exposure to news media of any sort. This situation did, however, fit the bill for a service learning course, open to students at any level.

What shocked me more than the students' lack of experience with alternative media was what quick studies they were. Events in the world kept catching them off-guard. The stories they were hearing and seeing seemed incomplete. They had a hunger to find the missing pieces—the censored stories.

I began the semester by constructing a web page (<http://mediastudy.com/picks.html>) that linked to a wide array of alternative news sources. The semester started out with discussions of various forms of censorship and self-censorship, followed by tips on finding a censored story. I organized the students into five groups—with the first task to name their groups. We got "Team WTF," "Team Liger" ("like a cross between a Lion and a Tiger"), and of course "Team No Name," and so on. The course met for nearly three hours once a week. Students brought food. Every week, students would engage course readings on the alternative press, scour the links I provided, and come into class and give reports on different alternative media outlets they'd encountered. We'd discuss whether or not we thought they were alternative media (sorry, *Huffington Post*), and why. By the third week, we started discussing group nominations for censored stories, working with research tools such as LexisNexis to determine if the stories fit the criteria of censored news. By the fourth week, students started cross-referencing and evaluating sources to determine the credibility, and hence, the validity, of the stories. By mid-semester,

we had our first Validated News Stories, and the monumental task of editing them down to two hundred or so words.

I don't want to make this seem like it was easy. It wasn't. There were many false leads, leads that didn't pan out, and write-ups of stories that just didn't make any sense. But I don't recall another class in which students seemed to blossom intellectually at such a fast rate. Once they discovered the world of alternative media, they couldn't let go of it. Web-addicted as students are, many became obsessed with this new online neighborhood—to the point of neglecting social media to instead surf this new terrain, weaving their new and old Internet lives together by posting their newfound world on their old social media networks. The class took over a large portion of their lives and mine, with excited student emails coming in around the clock. Students took on new stories to explore both as teams and as individuals, going beyond course expectations—an exhausting process for all involved.

By the end of the semester, students in this class had validated and published over a dozen censored stories, including one that was ranked by Project Censored judges as the #4 top censored story of the year—written by a team with no prior alternative media experience. However, success in validating stories was always secondary to learning. Not every team or student succeeded in validating a censored story, but every effort to validate a story was rewarded with a story of its own. Students would work on a story for a few weeks only to have a major media outlet pick it up, making it no longer censored. Though the students sometimes felt like they'd just been passed in a race, or worse yet, thrown out of the game, I explained that while it might not be good for their aspirations to discover the next big censored story, overall it was a good thing that the corporate media was doing their job, reminding them why we expose censored stories, and why ideally, there wouldn't be any censored stories to expose. Hence, it's important that grading formulas take into account not the final product, but the effort, strategies, and experiences involved with getting there, no matter where there might be. It was important to always encourage students, especially when they thought they were failing.

At the end of every semester, students anonymously evaluate their courses. The numerical feedback for this course could not be

any higher—literally. I understood that this really wasn't about me. I was coordinating this course more than I was teaching it, mostly pointing students in the direction of suspected censored stories, then guiding them through the validation process. And, as the students wrote, their first-hand encounter with the reality of corporate media censorship combined with their experience of the personal agency developed in thwarting that censorship was transformative. The Project Censored service learning partnership not only gave my students a rich academic experience and a new set of skills, it didn't just give some of them publications for their resumes or CVs—it transformed them into media makers and activists.

For instructors and students interested in learning more about how to include Project Censored curriculum in your school, visit the “Project Censored in the Classroom” webpage at <http://www.project-censored.org/project-censoreds-commitment-to-independent-news-in-the-classroom>.

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Note

1. “Obama’s War on Whistleblowers,” in *Censored 2014: Fearless Speech in Fateful Times*, eds. Mickey Huff and Andy Lee Roth (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2013), 72–75; see also chapter 2 in this volume for an update on this story.