

Democracy's Watchdog

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Summary

Students learn about the vital role the First Amendment protections of free speech and a free press play in American democracy using four case studies of notable investigative (or “watchdog”) reporting. This jigsaw-style lesson has students join an “expert” group to focus on one specific case study, then join their “jigsaw” group to share what they learned with their classmates. Jigsaw group members then document the details of each report and reflect on the role the First Amendment played in each of these historic pieces of journalism.

Learning Objective

I can explain the basic details of four historic examples of watchdog journalism, I can use these details to infer the role of a free press in a robust democracy, and I have reflected on the possible impact of losing the First Amendment protections of speech and the press.

Background

The press has historically, though imperfectly, served as a check on government and corporate power in the United States. By introducing students to iconic examples of watchdog journalists and their work, this lesson deepens students’ understanding of the outcomes and impact of the First Amendment on American society, both historically and today.

In each example, students will learn about an injustice that was exposed by watchdog journalism, and engage a variety of compelling social and political issues that can be explored in discussion or in assigned tasks or projects.

The work of Nellie Bly — who in 1887 posed as a mental patient to report on conditions at the Women’s Lunatic Asylum in New York City — raises enduring issues relating to mental health and gender inequity. In 1892, Ida B. Wells wrote her first articles exposing the horrors of lynching in America. Seymour Hersh’s reporting about the 1968 massacre of villagers by U.S. troops in Vietnam can open student inquiries into other examples of wrongdoing during wartime and fuel a search for other examples of investigative war reporting. Following the fatal shooting of a black teenager by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, Wesley Lowery and other reporters from The Washington Post discovered that there was no nationwide database of police shootings — so they created one.

These examples — spanning more than 130 years of investigative reporting in the United States — can help students connect with the work of today’s investigative reporters. They also provide opportunities to discuss contemporary examples of political investigations, along with issues such as child labor, supply chains and corporate responsibility.

This lesson also includes a series of independent learning resources. Tell your students how much time they are expected to spend exploring them; if necessary, give them strategies and guidance that they might need to do so.

CCSS Primary Alignment

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.RI.9-10.6:

Determine an author’s point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how an author uses rhetoric to advance that point of view or purpose.

WW Word Wall Terms

- First Amendment
- Watchdog
- Multiple sources
- Eyewitness source
- On-the-record source
- Anonymous source
- Context
- Fairness
- Free speech

Essential Questions

- What five freedoms are protected by the First Amendment?
- How do the five freedoms work together to strengthen American democracy? For example, how do the freedoms of speech and assembly work together?
- In what ways can a free press act like a “watchdog” on behalf of the public?
- What are some of the most important examples of watchdog journalism in American history?
- If the press sometimes acts like a watchdog, what is it protecting?
- Who watches the watchdogs?
- In what ways can investigative journalism bring about social or political change?

LESSON

Democracy's Watchdog

PREPARATION

What You'll Need

- Copies of each of the four watchdog journalism case study handouts
- **Optional:** One or more classroom devices with internet access (if you opt to have student groups do additional research about the case studies)

Directions

1. Review the four cases of watchdog journalism, using the teacher resource links at the end of this lesson and the case study handouts for students.
2. Plan to divide your class into two kinds of groups (“expert” and “jigsaw”) according to the lesson plan (i.e., ensuring that each “jigsaw” group will have an “expert” in each of the four case studies). Each student will be a member of two groups.
3. Decide how many class periods you would like to take to teach this, and adjust the timing of each section accordingly. In a single class period, students will have time to learn and share only the major aspects of each case. If you stretch the lesson over two or even three class periods, students can spend 15 or more minutes in their “expert” groups and can also spend more time reflecting on the relationship between the cases and the First Amendment protections of speech and press in their “jigsaw” groups. A third class period could be used to discuss and share student work on the optional Check for Understanding assignment about Chauncey Bailey.
4. Make copies of the case study handouts (one for each member of each expert group) and the two graphic organizers.

DEMOCRACY'S WATCHDOG LESSON PLAN

1. Begin by leading a discussion eliciting students' existing knowledge of investigative or "watchdog" journalism. (A do-now could be a short written response to the following prompt: "What do you think 'investigative reporting' is, and why is it sometimes called 'watchdog journalism'?") You may also choose to use one or more of the essential questions listed at the top of this lesson plan to jump-start student discussion.
2. Explain to students that they are going to be split into two kinds of small groups, an "expert" group and a "jigsaw" group.
3. Divide the class into these groups. For example, you can have students count off in numbers (1 to 4) then again in letters (A to D), so that each student has a number and a letter. The number would then represent their jigsaw grouping and the letter represents their expert grouping (A = Nellie Bly, B = Ida B. Wells, etc.).
4. With students in their expert groups, distribute the learning materials you have prepared for each case study (or have the materials waiting at the team tables or learning stations).
5. Announce that each expert team has one notable piece of investigative or watchdog journalism to learn about. They are to help one another learn as much as possible about this case in the time allotted. (For an average 50-minute class period, it is recommended that expert groups meet for 10 minutes.)
6. During this time, circulate the room and observe the expert groups as they review their case study and take notes on side one of their graphic organizers. To promote **active learning**, try to put the responsibility for finding a solution to difficulties back on the student group.
7. Encourage students to ask themselves the following questions as they work in their expert groups:
 - How can I put these ideas into my own words?
 - How will I tell the members of my jigsaw group about this example?
8. At the end of the time allowed, announce that students should get into their jigsaw groups, bringing their graphic organizers and other notes with them.
9. Check that each jigsaw team has at least one expert on each of the four stories.
10. Give the expert(s) of each case study a set amount of time to teach their jigsaw team members about their example of investigative reporting. (For an average 50-minute period, we recommend allowing 3 to 4 minutes per expert/example.) As the experts tell the other members of their jigsaw group about their case, they should record the details on their graphic organizer.
11. After each expert has had their allotted time to explain as much about their example of investigative reporting as possible, jigsaw groups may need an additional five minutes to finish filling out their graphic organizers, especially the portions that ask them to speculate about how a lack of First Amendment protections might have impacted each example.
12. Conclude the class by displaying a copy of the graphic organizer using an LCD projector and gathering as many details as possible from each jigsaw group.

DEMOCRACY'S WATCHDOG LESSON PLAN



Discussion Matchbox

- Which of these four cases do you think is the most important or had the most impact? Why?
- What subjects would you look into if you were an investigative reporter?
- Can citizens also play a watchdog role? Why or why not?
- Who benefits from the work of investigative reporters?
- Would it make any difference in your city or state, or in the country, if news organizations stopped producing investigative reports?

Extended Learning

- Challenge students to write a fictional Wikipedia entry for one of the historic cases of watchdog journalism (Bly, Wells or Hersh) as though it happened today. How might have the reporting, technology and methods used by the journalists have been different? What, if any, changes might there be in the impact and outcomes of their work?
- Ask students to find an example of investigative journalism that they believe is extremely important in some way. Next, challenge them to write a creative, fictional description of how life might have been different for the people affected by the topic of the investigation if the reporting had never happened. You might choose to set parameters for this piece of writing — assign a word limit or page length, integration of a minimum number of facts from the investigation, style or genre of writing (short story, journal entry, etc.) or other skills you would like to target.
- Ask students to search through recent examples of investigative reports and select one that is especially meaningful to them in some way. (You might limit their search to a collection you create, or to past winners of/finalists for the Pulitzer Prize for investigative reporting, winners of the Investigative Reporters and Editors award, stories shared using the #MuckReads hashtag, or stories from one or more specific news organizations.) Students could share their selected investigative story or series with others in any way you (or they) choose, such as in a mock mini-TED Talk, a PechaKucha or other style of lightning talk, a Quizlet study set, or a more substantial format such as a detailed slide deck, a personal essay, or a creative product of the student's choice.

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Democracy's Watchdog

Ten Days in a Mad-House

Nellie Bly, New York World
September – October 1887

CASE STUDY A

This case study is part of the
News Literacy Project's
"Democracy's Watchdog" lesson.



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Summary

By going undercover at an institution for mentally ill women in New York City, Nellie Bly, a reporter for the New York World, was able to report on conditions that the public had no way of seeing. She accepted a challenge from her editor to pretend to be insane so that she could spend at least a week in the institution as a patient, with neither the staff nor other patients aware of what she was really doing. She made careful notes on the rooms and buildings, the staff's treatment of the patients, the food and clothing provided to patients, the daily routines, and the effectiveness of management. Her goal was to "chronicle faithfully" her time there and write a "plain and unvarnished narrative" of her experience.

The institution on Blackwell's Island (now known as Roosevelt Island) became notorious after Bly's reports exposed her shocking findings. They prompted reforms at the institution, and the case is one of the most famous examples of undercover, investigative and muckraking journalism in the United States.

About the Journalist

Born in 1864 in Pennsylvania, Elizabeth Cochran was the 13th of 15 children in a blended family. At the age of 20, she was hired as a reporter for the Pittsburgh Dispatch newspaper, writing under the pen name "Nellie Bly." At the Dispatch, she wrote about women's rights, child labor, dangerous conditions for factory workers, social justice and reform. Unafraid and confident, Bly became a foreign correspondent and traveled throughout Mexico when she was 22. After her reports on official corruption and the lives of the poor in Mexico were published, the government there expelled her from the country.

A year later she moved to New York City and began working at The World, then owned by Joseph Pulitzer, where she gained a reputation as a fearless reporter known for going undercover to get stories. In addition to her revelations about the treatment of women on Blackwell's Island, Bly exposed corruption in New York state government, the poor treatment of jail inmates and the exploitation of sweatshop workers.

Her fame reached a peak in 1889, when at age 25 she traveled around the world in 72 days by ship, tugboat, train, carriage, horse and rickshaw. Readers eagerly followed her reports, and she became an international celebrity.

Nellie Bly died in 1922, just a few years after reporting from front-line battlefields in Europe during World War I.



When she was 16, before she was known as Nellie Bly, Elizabeth Cochran wrote a letter to the editor of the Pittsburgh Dispatch criticizing the obvious sexism of a column titled "What Girls Are Good For." The editor was so impressed with the letter that he offered her a job.

TIMELINE

SEPT. 23, 1887

Bly stays at a boardinghouse for women in New York City and pretends to be mentally ill.

SEPT. 24, 1887

She is taken by police to a judge, who sends her to Bellevue Hospital for a mental health exam.

SEPT. 25, 1887

Bly is given more medical exams at Bellevue and spends another night there.

SEPT. 26, 1887

Bly is transported by boat to the Blackwell's Island insane asylum, where about 1,600 patients live. She resumes her normal behavior for the rest of her stay there.

SEPT. 26-OCT. 6, 1887

In her time as a patient at Blackwell's Island, Bly is:

- Forced to take ice-cold baths.
- Locked in a small cell for the night.
- Witness to the staff choking, beating and abusing patients.
- Ignored by doctors when she explains that she is not insane.

OCT. 6, 1887

At the request of a lawyer for The World, Bly is released from the asylum.

TWO WEEKS LATER

After her reports are published, Bly returns to Blackwell's Island, this time accompanying members of a grand jury investigating conditions there.

CASE STUDY A: TEN DAYS IN A MAD-HOUSE, NELLIE BLY

News Literacy Note

According to Bly, her editor's instructions emphasized the importance of approaching her reporting without bias or prejudice. "We do not ask you to go there for the purpose of making sensational revelations," he told her. "Write up things as you find them, good or bad; give praise or blame as you think best, and the truth all the time." Even though everyone has biases, it's important for journalists to minimize bias to the greatest degree possible in their work.

Did you know that the **First Amendment protections of press and speech** allow journalists to play the watchdog role?



Playing the Watchdog Role

In the description of her first night at the hospital, Bly hints at journalism's watchdog role. A nurse refuses her request for a nightgown, telling her, "You are in a public institution now, and you can't expect to get anything." Bly replies, "But the city pays to keep these places up, and pays people to be kind to the unfortunates brought here." By bringing to light the conditions and practices at the institution, she lets the public see how its tax money is being spent — in this case, inefficiently, unfairly and abusively.

Why Does This Example of Journalism Matter?

Many of the patients Bly observed did not appear to be mentally ill at all. Some had physical, not mental, illnesses; others simply did not speak English; still others seemed to be there because of processing errors. And because of the wretched conditions and treatment, even the most mentally healthy person would find it difficult to stay that way, according to Bly. The truly mentally ill patients had even less ability to defend themselves and demand better care.

Bly's reporting gave a voice to the voiceless, the helpless and the powerless.

Outcomes

Bly's reports almost immediately prompted a grand jury investigation into conditions at the Blackwell's Island hospital. In the introduction to *Ten Days in a Mad-House*, a book collecting her reports, Bly wrote: "Since my experiences in Blackwell's Island Insane Asylum were published in the *World* ... the City of New York has appropriated \$1,000,000 more per annum [per year] than ever before for the care of the insane. So I have at least the satisfaction of knowing that the poor unfortunates will be the better cared for because of my work."



In 1935 the Chicago Daily Times published "Seven Days in the Madhouse" by Frank Smith, who posed as a patient to get admitted to an Illinois psychiatric hospital. Smith's 10-part series led to a statewide investigation of psychiatric hospitals and gained national attention.

Southern Horrors

Ida B. Wells, The Living Way, Free Speech And Headlight, Self-Published, 1890s

CASE STUDY B

This case study is part of the News Literacy Project's "Democracy's Watchdog" lesson.

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Summary

Ida B. Wells, a one-time schoolteacher, led a crusade against lynchings after she investigated the circumstances of hundreds of such killings and published findings that ran counter to what the public had believed. Between 1877 and 1950, more than 4,400 African-Americans, mostly men, were lynched in the United States, according to the Equal Justice Initiative. Most of these extrajudicial killings — either hangings or shootings — were reported at the time to be punishment for unwanted sexual advances or rapes of White women by Black men.

The truth, Wells discovered, was far different.

Incensed by the killing of a friend, she began interviewing family members of dozens of lynching victims. She talked with eyewitnesses — and with the accusers. She discovered that, in fact, most of those killed had been accused of minor offenses, such as failing to pay debts or public drunkenness; were in consensual relationships with White women; or simply had not been sufficiently deferential to a White person.

In direct, powerful writing, she exposed what she called "the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape White women." She also documented what she called "color line justice" — that White men assaulting Black women or girls were rarely punished.

Continuing her work for decades, Wells brought international attention to the horror of lynching and the systemic racism behind the murders.

About the Journalist

Ida B. Wells was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. Her parents became activists after the Civil War and Emancipation and encouraged their children to be educated. At 16, following the sudden death of her parents of yellow fever, she became a teacher to support herself and her siblings, first in Mississippi and then in 1882 in Memphis, Tennessee.



In 1884, she was dragged off a train after refusing to give up her seat for a White woman. Her journalism career began when she wrote about the injustice for *The Living Way*, a weekly newspaper for Black churches. She sued the railroad company and won — but the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the lower court's ruling.

In 1891, Wells was fired from her teaching job after writing critically about the state of education for Black children. As the editor and a co-owner of *Free Speech and Headlight*, a Black newspaper in Memphis, she began writing full-time about race and politics in the South — both for her own publication and for others.

TIMELINE

SEPT. 15, 1883

A White conductor on a Chesapeake, Ohio & Southwestern Railroad train removes Wells from her ticketed seat in the first-class car so a White woman can sit there. She sues the railroad and writes her first news article — for *The Living Way*, a church newspaper — about her treatment and her lawsuit. In December 1884, the court rules in her favor and awards her \$500 in damages. The railroad company appeals.

APRIL 5, 1887

The Tennessee Supreme Court overturns the lower-court ruling and orders Wells to pay the court costs associated with her suit. Six days later, she writes in her diary: "I felt so disappointed because I had hoped such great things from my suit for my people ... O God, is there no redress, no peace, no justice in this land for us?"

1889

While continuing her work as a teacher, Wells becomes a co-owner and the editor of the Memphis anti-segregation newspaper *Free Speech and Headlight*.

1891

Wells is dismissed from her teaching position by the Memphis Board of Education for her critical reporting of school conditions for Black children. She begins reporting full time.

MARCH 9, 1892

Wells' friend Thomas Moss, who had opened a grocery store in Memphis three years earlier, is murdered by a lynch mob, along with two of his employees.

MAY 27, 1892

While Wells is in Philadelphia, the *Free Speech and Headlight* office is destroyed by a mob. Fearing for her safety, she moves to Chicago.

1892

Wells' booklet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* is published by the *New York Age*, a Black newspaper.

1893

Wells founds the Women's Era Club in Chicago, a civic club for Black women.

1893 & 1894

Wells travels to Britain twice to speak to audiences about the problem of lynchings in the United States and becomes a paid correspondent for the *Daily Inter-Ocean* for her 1894 tour.

1896

Wells is a founding member of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and is the first secretary of the National Afro-American Council.

CASE STUDY B: SOUTHERN HORRORS, IDA B. WELLS

News Literacy Note

In the late 19th century, newspapers were the sole source of news for most Americans — and there were few, if any, ways for readers to verify whether their reporting was accurate and unbiased. The widespread assumption that most men who were lynched were guilty of raping White women was based on false information provided by public officials to White-owned newspapers. Wells, like many others, tended to believe these statements — until one of her friends, Thomas Moss, was lynched, three years after opening a grocery store that took business away from a White-owned store nearby.

Playing the Watchdog Role

By questioning what officials and others in power were claiming, Wells learned and exposed the real circumstances of lynchings throughout the South. She also revealed the role that newspapers were playing in spreading misinformation about lynchings. For example, the Daily Commercial, in Memphis, published an editorial on May 17, 1892, under the headline “More Rapes, More Lynchings,” justifying the murder of Black men: “Nothing but the most prompt, speedy and extreme punishment can hold in check the horrible and bestial propensities of the Negro race.”

Wells investigated stories the way that reporters from the Daily Commercial and other newspapers should have done if they had actually been pursuing the truth.

Why Does This Example of Journalism Matter?

During this period, local newspapers typically reported what official sources, such as the police, said had happened without seeking further information. Not only did Wells’ reporting demonstrate that these news accounts were false, but she also argued that the primary purpose of lynching across the South was a systematic effort to intimidate African-Americans — what she called the “lesson of subordination”: “Kill the leaders and it will cow the Negro who dares to shoot a white man, even in self-defense.”

Outcomes

As Wells spoke out against lynching, others monitored the topic, too. In 1908, the Tuskegee Institute, a private Black university established in the 1880s in Alabama, began collecting records, drawing mainly from newspaper accounts. In 1912, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization that Wells helped to found, started an independent effort to document lynchings. (The Chicago Tribune, for reasons unknown, had begun tracking lynchings — and publishing an annual list of victims — in 1882.)

Wells’ unflinching reporting about lynchings raised the public’s consciousness about the horrors of this form of “punishment.” Her legacy includes the establishment in 2016 of The Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting, based at Harvard University’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, which was created to train journalists of color in investigative reporting techniques and “to educate news organizations and journalists on how the inclusion of diverse voices can raise the caliber, impact and visibility of investigative journalism as a means of promoting transparency and good government.”

For her 1894 tour of England, she was hired by the Daily Inter-Ocean of Chicago to write about her travels and experiences — thus becoming the first African-American woman to be a paid correspondent for a White-owned newspaper.



In documenting their circumstances, Wells showed that lynchings were a way for Whites to maintain power by terrorizing the African-American community. Her reports, published initially as columns and later in the booklet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, led to threats on her life; her newspaper office was burned down.



In 2018, Wells was included in The New York Times’ “Overlooked” project, which publishes news obituaries for prominent women and minorities whose lives were not documented by the paper when they died.

My Lai Massacre

Seymour Hersh, Dispatch News Service

November – December 1969

CASE STUDY C

This case study is part of the News Literacy Project's "Democracy's Watchdog" lesson.

News Literacy Project

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Summary

Throughout the 1960s, the United States sent an increasing number of troops to support the government of South Vietnam in its intense war against the Communist government of North Vietnam. By 1968, about 20,000 U.S. troops had been killed in Vietnam, and opposition to the war was growing ever stronger at home.

In early 1968, acting on faulty intelligence that a village cluster known as My Lai was an enemy haven, U.S. troops entered the area and destroyed livestock, crops and food supplies; burned homes; committed rape; and killed hundreds of unarmed villagers — mostly women, children and elderly men.

Though the military conducted internal investigations about the events at My Lai, it was the reporting of a freelance American journalist that brought the massacre to public attention back home.

About the Journalist

Seymour M. "Sy" Hersh began his journalism career as a reporter with United Press International and The Associated Press. In 1969, as a freelance reporter, his stories for the Dispatch News Service about the massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. soldiers stirred public outcry against the war. In 1970 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting "for his exclusive disclosure of the Vietnam War tragedy at the hamlet of My Lai." Hersh subsequently worked in The New York Times' Washington bureau for several years and wrote several books. Since 1993 he has been a contributor to The New Yorker magazine, which in 2004 published his reporting that exposed abuses of prisoners by the U.S. military at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq.



Hersh has said he was "tipped off about My Lai by Geoffrey Cowan, a young antiwar lawyer in Washington, D.C. Cowan had little specific information, but he'd heard that an unnamed G.I. had gone crazy and killed scores of Vietnamese civilians."

TIMELINE

MARCH 16, 1968

After arriving by helicopter in the morning, U.S. combat soldiers burn homes, destroy crops and livestock, rape women and kill hundreds of civilians in My Lai, a village cluster in South Vietnam.

APRIL 1969

After a young Army veteran, Ronald Ridenhour, alerts members of Congress and government officials to information he has learned about the My Lai massacre, the Army launches an inquiry that leads to a criminal investigation. Five months later, the Army files charges of premeditated murder against 2nd Lt. William L. Calley, the leader of the first platoon to enter My Lai.

NOV. 13, 1969

Seymour Hersh's first article detailing events at My Lai and the military's ongoing investigation about what happened there is published in 35 newspapers through the Dispatch News Service. Follow-up articles are published Nov. 20 and Nov. 25.

NOV. 17, 1969

Following Hersh's initial report, The New York Times publishes an article about My Lai, quoting massacre survivors living in a nearby village who corroborated Hersh's reporting.

NOV. 20, 1969

The Cleveland Plain Dealer publishes photos taken by an Army photographer, Ron Haeberle, at the scene of the My Lai massacre. In an exclusive interview with the newspaper, Haeberle describes grim details of the killings he witnessed.

NOV. 26, 1969

Gen. William C. Westmoreland, the Army chief of staff, orders an investigation into a possible military cover-up of events at My Lai.

DEC. 5, 1969

The CBS Evening News broadcasts Haeberle's photos.

MARCH 1970

The Army files charges against 14 officers, including generals and colonels, accused of covering up the massacre. Thirteen of those cases are dismissed due to insufficient evidence; in the 14th case, a brigade commander is court-martialed and acquitted.

NOV. 1970

Calley's court-martial begins at Fort Benning, Georgia.

CASE STUDY C: MY LAI MASSACRE, SEYMOUR HERSH

News Literacy Note

A strong dose of skepticism is healthy for journalists when reporting on people or institutions with great power. Journalists stationed in South Vietnam's capital, Saigon, during the war began to refer to the U.S. military's daily press briefings as "The Five O'Clock Follies," illustrating reporters' growing frustration that the official information they were being given was not entirely credible.



"My Lai became important in America only after it was reported by an American."

— North Vietnam's Nguyen Thi Binh, during peace talks in Paris



Playing the Watchdog Role

Hersh's reporting on My Lai and the military's investigation into what happened there, and the coverage by other news organizations that followed Hersh's work, fueled public disillusionment about U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Less than two years later, another scandal came to light: The New York Times and other news organizations published parts of a secret U.S. government report, known as the Pentagon Papers, revealing that the nation's leaders had intentionally misled the public about the war.

Why Does This Example of Journalism Matter?

Doggedly following a story, no matter how controversial or how it reflects on powerful leaders, is often essential in revealing the truth. Hersh later reported that Nguyen Thi Binh, who headed the North Vietnamese delegation at peace talks in Paris and later served two terms as Vietnam's vice president, told him: "My Lai became important in America only after it was reported by an American." A spokesman for the North Vietnamese in Paris had publicly described the massacre only weeks after it occurred, Hersh wrote, but the story was widely dismissed as propaganda.

Outcomes

Revelations about the horrific acts committed by U.S. soldiers further eroded support for the war and increased public demands that the U.S. withdraw its troops from Vietnam. The disclosures also raised troubling and difficult questions about the nature of war: whether the policy of drafting and training young soldiers is effective, how misleading information can affect the conduct of military forces in combat, and whether following orders can relieve soldiers of moral responsibility for perpetrating atrocities.



Ronald Ridenhour, the young Army veteran whose own investigation into My Lai led to the Army's formal inquiries, later became a reporter and in 1987 won the George Polk Award for local reporting for an investigation into a tax scandal in New Orleans.



Seymour Hersh's reporting on My Lai was honored in 1970 with the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting.

Fatal Force

The Washington Post
2015 – present

This case study is part of the
News Literacy Project's
“Democracy’s Watchdog” lesson.

CASE STUDY D



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Summary

The community of Ferguson, Missouri, erupted in anger after a White police officer killed an unarmed Black teenager on Aug. 9, 2014. The immediate cause for outrage in the St. Louis suburb was the shooting itself and the immediate police response: Michael Brown’s body lay in the street for four hours, and police gave few reasons to explain why the shooting had occurred. Authorities initially said only that Brown’s actions had led to a “physical altercation” and a struggle for the officer’s gun; some eyewitnesses disputed this, and pointed out that Brown was three dozen feet from the police car when shot several times.

The situation quickly worsened for other reasons, too. Residents in the majority-Black town of Ferguson had long had a tense relationship with largely White local government and law enforcement. The protests were, said many protesters and observers, also the result of long-standing systemic racial bias and police brutality.

What began as a series of sometimes-violent protests in Ferguson by citizens demanding answers and action led to a national acrimonious (and ongoing) debate about race, accountability and justice.

The Washington Post was among the news outlets reporting from Ferguson. As reporters tried to provide a full accounting of that event and the broader background, they came to a surprising realization: No federal agency kept track of police shootings across the United States.

The FBI is supposed to track fatal shootings by police officers, using reports submitted by the nation’s 18,000 police departments. But it turned out that only 3 percent of these departments sent in their information.

That meant there was no way for police officers and citizens to understand whether there were patterns in the types of shootings or what could be done to improve matters.

So the Post started to carry out the tracking itself, creating Fatal Force, a project based on a database of “every fatal shooting in the United States by a police officer in the line of duty since Jan. 1, 2015.”

Right away, the Post learned that there were twice as many police shootings in 2015 and 2016 as the FBI had believed. It also learned that the overwhelming majority of those killed by police were armed White men, but that unarmed Black people were killed at a rate seven times higher than unarmed White people, and that mental illness played a role in a quarter of the cases.

The Post won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for national reporting for, as the Pulitzer board said, “its revelatory initiative in creating and using a national database to illustrate how often and why the police shoot to kill and who the victims are most likely to be.”

About the Journalists

The national database started out as a spreadsheet with bare facts: News researchers Jennifer Jenkins and Julie Tate combed the internet seeking details about police shootings from news reports, police department news releases and social media mentions. The facts they entered included people’s ages, gender and type of weapon for police shootings in every state.

Then it got more complex, as graphics editor John Muyskens, who helped build the internal database, started sorting more than a dozen such factors of each incident so they could be understood as part of a whole. The more information they had, the more the Fatal Force team started to see patterns in shootings — facts on which stories could be told using narrative, graphics and videos so the public could clearly understand the numbers.

The project grew to include about 70 journalists from the Post’s national, investigative, metro, video, photo and graphics departments.

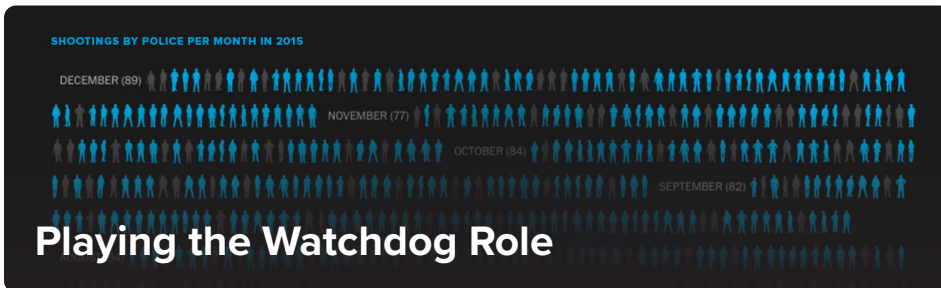
Proposing the project was Wesley Lowery, a national correspondent covering law enforcement and justice and their intersection with politics and policy. Other staff members whose names were on the pieces submitted for the Pulitzer were Keith L. Alexander, a reporter covering crime and courts; Amy Brittain, an investigative reporter; Alice Crites, a library-trained news researcher; Marc Fisher, a senior editor; Derek Hawkins, a national reporter focused on cybersecurity; Scott Higham, an investigative reporter; Kimbriell Kelly, an investigative reporter; Kimberly Kindy, a national investigative reporter; Ted Mellnik, a database editor; Steven Rich, a database editor for the investigations unit; and Sandhya Somashekhar, a national correspondent.

The Fatal Force team continues to examine how to make the database easy for the public to understand, contribute to and use. In 2016, the Post began including details about the reporting, such as how many times reporters had to use open-records requests in seeking information from police departments.

CASE STUDY D: FATAL FORCE, THE WASHINGTON POST

News Literacy Note

Reporters are acting in the public interest when they try to hold those in power accountable. But those with authority often don't like to be questioned. While reporting on the aftermath of Brown's death in Ferguson, Lowery and Ryan Reilly of The Huffington Post were arrested by St. Louis County police officers on charges of trespassing. Lowery was the one who suggested later that the Post begin the project that led to the database of police shootings.



As the Post's own reports noted, family members of people killed in police shootings had often sought answers from the justice system, to no avail. This newsroom's determination to find answers and its ongoing meticulous, methodical efforts proved powerful. The coverage changed the behavior of the agency responsible for tracking law enforcement: Then-FBI Director James Comey called the dearth of accurate data "embarrassing and ridiculous," and the FBI vowed to keep track of police killings.

Why Does This Example of Journalism Matter?

As David Klinger, a criminology professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis and a former police officer, told Columbia Journalism Review: "Without data, we can't have an intelligent conversation" about policing. And before the database, there were no solid facts about police shootings.

The data supported what people suspected — that unarmed Black men are killed at a disproportionate rate. And though "race is the most volatile flash point," as the Post wrote in summarizing its first year of collecting data, there are other useful insights and findings the public can act on, including this: "[T]he great majority of people who died at the hands of the police fit at least one of three categories: they were wielding weapons, they were suicidal or mentally troubled, or they ran when officers told them to halt."

Outcomes

The Post's database has proved to be "an excellent resource for reporters across the country" because they now have data on which to build their own reports and better serve the public. In an interview with the National Press Foundation, researcher Tate said that local news reports she sees three years after the Post began its project seem much more thorough; she believes that the project has helped encourage reporters to demand and get more answers from authorities.

The "increased media scrutiny," as the Post put it in January 2016, has led to public discussions and new forms of training and policies to lower the number of killings.

Visit washingtonpost.com to see the [Fatal Force database](#) based on news reports, public records, social media and other sources.

TIMELINE

AUG. 9, 2014

Michael Brown, 18, is shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. His body is left in the street for four hours as family members are kept away by investigating authorities. Residents begin prayer vigils and protests.

AUG. 10-11, 2014

Protests turn violent, with some stores looted and burned; police begin using tear gas.

AUG. 11, 2014

FBI opens a civil rights investigation into the shooting of Michael Brown.

2015

After a year of reporting, The Washington Post begins publishing "Fatal Force," a series of articles, graphics and videos that reflect findings from a database it started in 2014.

1,033

open-records requests sent by The Washington Post to police departments involved in a fatal shooting in 2016.



Helping the Post with its investigation were students from American University's Investigative Reporting Workshop, part of the School of Communication.

To make sure its reports were fair and accurate, the Post phoned every police department involved; it would not include an officer's name in the database or report unless the department had been called for comment. AU graduate students made the calls to corroborate information for the Fatal Force team.

DEMOCRACY'S WATCHDOG GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

NAME: _____ PERIOD: _____

CASE STUDY: A B C D

Part 1: Expert

Fill in the four boxes below as you become an expert on your assigned example of watchdog journalism. In the rectangle on the right, jot down additional suggestions and details from your Expert group discussion to help you explain the case study to your Jigsaw group.

Who was involved in this case study?

Summarize the events, including where and when they occurred.

Details & suggestions from members of your Expert group

What were the outcomes?

In what ways did the **First Amendment** play a role in this case study?

DEMOCRACY'S WATCHDOG GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

NAME: _____ PERIOD: _____

CASE STUDY: A B C D

Part 2: Jigsaw

Fill in the four boxes below as you learn about the other case studies from your Jigsaw group. In the rectangle on the right, jot down your group's thinking about the following question:

What might have been different about these five examples if the First Amendment protections of press and speech did not exist?

<p>Case study: Nellie Bly</p>	<p>Case study: Ida B. Wells</p>
<p>Case study: My Lai</p>	<p>Case study: Fatal Force</p>

If the **First Amendment** protections of press and speech did not exist, what might have been different about these examples?