# Notable Investigative Journalism Cases Throughout History

*Scroll through some of the most notable cases of investigative journalism and see how the role of the watchdog has shaped history.*

**1887**

### "Ten Days in a Mad House"

Nellie Bly, a young reporter, went undercover at an institution for the mentally ill and exposed its shockingly poor conditions.

Almost immediately, the state of New York allocated $1 million more per year to care for the mentally ill; her reporting also prompted a grand jury investigation into the institution.

**Nellie Bly (Pictured)**
*New York World*

**1890s**

### Ida B. Wells documents lynchings

Through her investigative reporting on lynchings across the South, Ida B. Wells exposed that Black men were being lynched on the basis of false claims made with the purpose of maintaining a White supremacist social order.

Wells raised public awareness of the injustices of lynching, contributing to the eventual eradication of the crime.

**Ida B. Wells (Pictured)**
*New York Age, Free Speech and Headlight, self-published*

**1950s-1960s**

### Moses Newson covers the civil rights movement

Moses Newson, a Black reporter working in Memphis, Tennessee, and Baltimore, Maryland, covered many of the significant events of the civil rights movement, including the murder of Emmett Till, school desegregation and the 1961 Freedom Rides.

Newson's coverage helped Americans understand and sympathize with the goals of the civil rights movement.

**Moses Newson**
*Baltimore Afro-American, Tri-State Defender*

**1962**

### Silent Spring

Biologist Rachel Carson compiled evidence of the detrimental effects of pesticides and presented it to the American public in her book Silent Spring.

Though Silent Spring was initially met with backlash, especially from chemical companies, its findings resulted in a ban of the chemical DDT and inspired an environmental movement that led to the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency.

**Rachel Carson**
*Published by Houghton Mifflin, serialized in The New Yorker*

**1969**

### My Lai massacre

Independent investigative journalist Seymour Hersh exposed the U.S. military cover-up of the 1968 massacre by U.S. soldiers of more than 500 unarmed Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai.

The outrage prompted by Hersh's reporting contributed to the growth and influence of the antiwar movement across the United States. Lt. William Calley, who commanded one of the three platoons involved in the massacre, was the only person convicted in connection with the killings; he was pardoned by President Richard Nixon after serving three years, mostly under house arrest.

**Seymour Hersh**
*Dispatch News Service*

**1971**

### The Pentagon Papers

The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) compiled a top-secret history of American involvement in Vietnam from 1945 to 1967. Through his work as an analyst at the RAND Corp., a research center with close ties to the government, Daniel Ellsberg — a former DOD analyst who had worked on early versions of the history — had access to the report and leaked it to The New York Times.

The leaked papers detailed how multiple presidential administrations actively misled the American public about the intentions and consequences of involvement in Southeast Asia. The resulting public outrage fueled the antiwar movement; the United States withdrew all troops from Vietnam two years later.

**Neil Sheehan and 43 journalists from The New York Times**
*The New York Times*

**1972-1974**

### Watergate

Initially investigating a break-in at the Democratic Party's national headquarters in June 1972, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward exposed a series of crimes that were connected to President Richard Nixon's re-election campaign.

Rather than face impeachment, Nixon resigned in August 1974. The scandal had long-term effects on Americans' sense of trust in the federal government as well as on expectations of political transparency.

**Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward**
*The Washington Post*

**1983**

### "Lenell Geter's in Jail"

Morley Safer, a reporter with 60 Minutes, investigated the case of Lenell Geter, a young Black man with no criminal record, who was sentenced to life in prison for an armed robbery of a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. His report shed light on the effect of racial bias on what turned out to be a wrongful conviction.

Geter was released from prison in 1984.

**Morley Safer**
*CBS' "60 Minutes"*

LENELL GETER'S
IN JAIL
PRODUCED BY
SUZANNE ST. PIERRE

**1987**

### "City Council: The Spoils of Power"

Three Chicago journalists tracked the expenditures and actions of Chicago's 50-member City Council and revealed that the governing body was wasteful and largely ineffectual.

A decade later, a Tribune editorial noted that the City Council's membership had changed since the series was published, as had the mayor. But, it went on, "this much is constant: The City Council is still a haven for people on the make. It is still a gross embarrassment to Chicago."

**Ann Marie Lipinski, Dean Baquet, William Gaines**
*Chicago Tribune*

**1992**

### "Tainted Cash or Easy Money?"

Two Florida journalists investigated a sheriff's interstate drug squad, finding that it had seized $8 million from largely Black and Hispanic motorists in 262 vehicle stops. In 199 of these cases, no charges were ever filed.

The Orlando Sentinel series and other exposés of similar actions led to enactment of the Civil Asset Forfeiture Reform Act in 2000. It changed federal forfeiture law to allow owners of seized property to be reimbursed for legal fees after successfully suing the government. (It did not, however, change state law.)

**Jeff Brazil and Steve Barry**
*Orlando Sentinel*

**1996**

### "Tribal Housing: From Deregulation to Disgrace"

Three journalists from The Seattle Times revealed that due to a lack of oversight and regulation, funds from a federal housing program meant to help low-income Native Americans were being used to line the pockets of the wealthy.

Management of the program was reformed.

**Alex Tizon, Eric Nalder, Deborah Nelson**
*The Seattle Times*

**2002**

### Spotlight Investigation: Abuse in the Catholic Church

The Boston Globe's Spotlight investigative team uncovered the systemic sexual abuse of children by Roman Catholic priests, as well as the Boston Archdiocese's attempts at covering up the crimes.

Thousands of victims around the world have come forward. The Catholic Church in the U.S. has implemented a variety of policies and programs to promote the safety of children.

**Walter Robinson and the Spotlight investigative team**
*The Boston Globe*

**2011**

### Surveillance of Muslim communities

The Associated Press disclosed the existence of a secret surveillance program through which the New York Police Department monitored and infiltrated mosques and Muslim community groups. The monitoring was done based on ethnicity and religion, not on probable cause.

The investigation spurred three lawsuits, all of which were settled in favor of those who had been illegally surveilled by the NYPD. The department agreed to greater oversight.

**Matt Apuzzo, Adam Goldman and others**
*The Associated Press*

**2013**

### The National Security Agency's global surveillance program

Based on a leak of National Security Agency documents by Edward Snowden, a former NSA contractor, The Washington Post and The Guardian US published reports on the agency's surveillance program, including the revelation that the NSA collects U.S. citizens' phone records.

Congress ended the program that collected phone records, and the NSA now adheres to stricter transparency regulations. The leak and subsequent reporting brought issues of privacy to the forefront of national conversation.

**Barton Gellman (The Washington Post; pictured), Glenn Greenwald (The Guardian US), Laura Poitras and others**
*The Washington Post, The Guardian US*

**2014**

### Medicare Unmasked

After pressuring the U.S. government to release a trove of Medicare billing data, The Wall Street Journal made this information accessible to all in a searchable database and exposed potentially billions of dollars in bogus Medicare payments.

This investigation set a precedent for journalists being able to identify medical fraud and abuse, and brought attention to doctors' misuse of tax dollars.

**The staff of The Wall Street Journal**
*The Wall Street Journal*

**2014**

### "Product of Mexico"

A reporter and a photographer with the Los Angeles Times traveled to agricultural labor camps in Mexico and exposed the inhumane conditions to which workers are subjected.

American consumers demanded that U.S. companies that rely on Mexican imports conduct reviews of their purchasing practices; within Mexico, movements to improve wages and conditions gained steam.

**Richard Marosi and Don Bartletti**
*Los Angeles Times*

**2014**

### Why did the U.S. lock up these women with men?

A Fusion Media investigation found that transgender women immigrating to the U.S. without documents were being held in detention centers with men; as a result, they often experienced sexual harassment and were statistically far more likely to be sexually abused than other detainees.

A year later, Immigration and Customs Enforcement issued a memorandum that transgender detainees may be placed in facilities that match their gender identity.

**Cristina Costantini, Jorge Rivas, Kristofer Rios**
*Fusion Media*

**2015**

### "Fatal Force"

While covering the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, that followed the fatal police shooting of an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, reporters for The Washington Post realized that there was no federal database of fatal police shootings, so they created one. Their research brought to light a few significant trends in these shootings, including that unarmed Black men were killed at a rate seven times higher than unarmed White men.

Analyses of the database's contents contribute to a growing body of evidence that Black men are disproportionately affected by police brutality.

**Wesley Lowery and others**
*The Washington Post*

**2015**

### Exxon and climate change

Reporters with Columbia Journalism School's Energy and Environmental Reporting Project examined Exxon's communications, starting in the 1980s. They found that although the company internally acknowledged the threat of global warming, it funded a public disinformation campaign claiming that the science of climate change was unsettled.

Multiple attorneys launched investigations into the company, now known as ExxonMobil, for misleading the public. In May 2017, a vote by ExxonMobil shareholders required the company to more clearly report how climate change affects its business.

***Columbia Journalism School's Energy and Environmental Reporting Project***
*Columbia Journalism School's Energy and Environmental Reporting Project, in collaboration with the Los Angeles Times and The Guardian*

EXXON
Regular
Unleaded
Plus

**2016**

### The Panama Papers

Dozens of politicians and celebrities were implicated in 11.5 million leaked documents from the Panamanian financial firm Mossack Fonseca. Reporters in over 80 countries broke the story hidden in these documents: that wealthy individuals create shell companies in order to evade taxes, sanctions and detection.

The revelations had ripple effects across the world, leading to the resignation or removal of many high-ranking officials.

**Collaboration by over 100 media organizations, led by Süddeutsche Zeitung and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists**
*Journalists from over 100 media outlets in 80 countries*

**2016**

### "Out of Balance"

The Indianapolis Star scoured public records for information about misconduct within USA Gymnastics, the sport's governing body. Reporters found that over two decades, at least 368 gymnasts had alleged that they had been sexually abused in some way by coaches, gym owners and other adults working in gymnastics — and that USA Gymnastics' national team physician, Larry Nassar, who also was on the faculty of Michigan State University's College of Osteopathic Medicine, had been molesting scores of young gymnasts, including members of the U.S. women's Olympic team, since the early 1990s.

Nassar pleaded guilty to criminal sexual conduct charges, admitted using his position to molest underage girls and was sentenced to 175 years in prison. The president and the entire board of USA Gymnastics resigned, as did the president and the athletic director of Michigan State University.

**The investigations team at The Indianapolis Star**
*The Indianapolis Star*

**2017**

### Harvey Weinstein

Within days of each other, The New York Times and The New Yorker published investigations into Harvey Weinstein, a powerful Hollywood executive. Since those articles appeared, more than 80 women have accused Weinstein of sexual misconduct or assault, contending that he had used his position, his wealth and his network of assistants to further his sexual activity. The women said that if they spoke out against him, he attempted to end their careers.

Weinstein was fired from his company. He has been charged in New York with rape, predatory sexual assault and committing a criminal sex act; investigations in other cities are ongoing. The news reports spawned the #MeToo movement of women speaking out against the high-profile men who they said had sexually abused them.

**Jodi Kantor and Meghan Twohey (The New York Times), Ronan Farrow (The New Yorker)**
*The New York Times, The New Yorker*