

Selig, Zoe
Monday, December 4

Journalism, Done Well(s)

“Democracy dies in darkness,” declares *The Washington Post* at the top of every paper. The field of journalism aims to provide an honest account of world events and perspectives, seeking out stories and spreading them to a larger audience. Good journalism, most people agree, should be objective and fact-based—but this does not mean journalism must represent all sides of an issue equally and never challenge the status quo. On the contrary, the best journalism searches for issues of contention and injustice, aiming to inform the public of wrongs being committed. As *The Washington Post* motto suggests, independent journalism is one of the strongest means we have for holding institutions of power accountable and inducing equality. By spreading true facts to a larger audience, journalism gives the public the tools to advocate for justice.

But, while journalism absolutely speaks truth, does it necessarily speak truth *to power*? I answer that question with a definite yes. Using the example of Ida B. Wells’ investigative reporting on lynching in the American South, I will demonstrate that journalism absolutely speaks truth to power in two key ways. First, it raises awareness of issues suppressed by those in power by gathering and spreading facts to a larger audience. Second, it generates change by motivating its readers to take action against the injustices it reveals. Especially in circumstances where those in power are stifling the facts, I argue that merely the act of speaking the truth is a tremendous act of protest. As I make this argument, I will discuss how Wells ignited a movement against racist violence by revealing the realities of lynching to the global and American public. In

spite of threats and violence, Wells continually sought out and spread facts with the goal of reaching justice, using journalism to speak truth to power and pursue the end of lynching.

The first step Wells took in using journalism to speak truth to power was searching for and spreading facts that those in power wanted to keep hidden. The powerful can only retain their power when people let them, so it is in their best interest to control the flow of information to only include their narrative and hide any evidence of wrongdoing or corruption. This can look like an institution such as the government repressing facts that counter their narrative, but in Wells' case, the power she fought was mainly the system of white supremacy throughout American society at the time, which was evident in the lynching of Black Americans. Lynching, or the act of murdering someone with no trial for an accused crime, was rampant throughout the American South but was barely seen as an issue before Wells began reporting on it. Police departments were often openly involved in lynching and white newspapers only reported on it as an advertisement to watch the spectacle of murder (Francis 2021). White lynchers walked freely and were praised for their actions, while most Black people lived in fear. Nobody was aware of the immense scale at which lynching was occurring, because nobody was talking about it—until Wells did.

After a close friend of hers was lynched, Wells set out to uncover the hidden truth about lynching through investigative reporting. She traveled throughout the South, conducting interviews with both witnesses and survivors as well as reviewing documentation in newspapers of previous lynching cases (Walker 2020). Then, she compiled this information into statistical data, publishing articles and pamphlets on lynching's harsh realities. In her 1895 pamphlet *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States*, Wells listed all known cases of lynching against Black people that had occurred in 1893, identifying the names,

dates, locations, and allegations of those who had been killed (Wells 1895, 16-20). Then, she went into more detail, describing many specific instances of lynching. She reported that in almost all cases, the offenses of which people were accused had never actually happened and described the much more mundane scenes that led to the accusations. Wells contrasted this coverage with precise descriptions of the brutal scenes of torture, beating, and lynching that killed these innocent people. Just by learning about and reporting on lynching, Wells spoke truth to power. When the white government and society did not want anyone to look too closely at the barbaric truth of lynching, speaking that truth at all was an act of defiance.

Wells understood that reporting on these facts was a key element in creating change and eliminating lynching because it was a call to action. In her pamphlet *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*, she wrote an essay called "Self Help," in which she expressed that "the people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press" (Wells 1892, 23). Wells' ultimate goal was the end of lynching, and she saw that journalism was the best tool to make it happen by galvanizing readers to her cause. Because journalism both finds facts and spreads them to a wide audience, it was and continues to be an especially useful means of speaking truth to power. Understanding that people would only be moved to action after hearing the facts, Wells spoke the truth to encourage others to speak truth to power. She used journalism as a medium to spread the truth about lynching and counteract the white supremacist propaganda that had kept most people of color uninformed and unfocused on the issue. By speaking the truth through journalism, Wells wanted to motivate her readers to take action against lynching in America.

Spreading the truth about lynching to the public refuted false and harmful myths that had previously allowed it to perpetuate. Before knowing the facts, many people of color, including

Wells, had believed that lynching was a just punishment for Black men who raped white women (Francis 2021). Through her reporting, Wells showed that lynching neither carried out justice nor occurred because of actual crimes like raping white women. In fact, she found and clearly stated that of all lynchings in 1893, “not one-third of the victims lynched were charged with rape, and further that the charges made embraced a range of offenses from murders to misdemeanors” (Wells 1895, 20). She revealed that many victims of lynching were Black people who “disrespected” white people, were in consensual relationships with white women, or owned stores that competed with white-owned businesses (“Our Namesake” 2023). This revelation reversed the narrative of lynching, showing the public for the first time that lynching was not justice but an illegal violation of the right to a fair trial and a way of reinforcing white supremacy. It also contradicted the stereotype of Black men as violent predators, demonstrating that they were more commonly the victims of violence than the perpetrators of it. Once Wells’ readers learned of these facts, they were better able to dismantle their previously held beliefs about lynching and fight for change.

Wells’ journalism also rebelled against white supremacy because it gave a voice to people who were otherwise ignored by most of white American society. She not only spread facts but spread the personal stories of people of color who were suffering from the existence of racism and lynching. In a nation where most Black people and their perspectives were ignored, Wells raised the voices of herself and other Black people, pushing back against racist norms of complacency. This was an important aspect of speaking truth to power because oppression requires nonresistance. Wells highlighted the Black perspective as she opposed lynching, thwarting the norm of ignoring Black people and expecting them to accept abuse. Using

journalism to magnify voices that were typically silenced once again brought the popular understanding of lynching closer to the truth, strengthening Wells' fight against oppression.

Additionally, using a fact-based journalistic writing style added significantly to Wells' ability to sway public opinion and understanding around lynching. She described lynching with extremely precise language, never sugarcoating the horrific realities of painful beating and torture before the murder. For example, in describing the lynching of Henry Smith in Paris, Texas, Wells described that "the victim was tortured for fifty minutes by red-hot iron brands thrust against his quivering body. Commencing at the feet the brands were placed against him inch by inch until they were thrust against the face. Then, being apparently dead, kerosene was poured upon him, cottonseed hulls placed beneath him and set on fire" (Wells 1895, 28). Wells did not use vague euphemisms to describe the scenes of lynching, and she certainly did not exalt them in the way many white newspapers of the time did. Instead, she provided an honest and true account of the horrors of lynching, forcing her audience to confront its brutal reality.

Prominent civil rights activist Frederick Douglass also recognized the power of Wells' words. He wrote Wells a letter, which she published as a preface to her pamphlets, expressing that "there has been no word equal to [your paper] in convincing power... You give us what you know and testify from actual knowledge. You have dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity, and left those naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves" (Wells 1892, 3). As an accomplished writer and activist himself, Douglass recognized the power of Wells' words and their capacity to bring about real change. Wells' use of fact-based journalism had a profound impact on readers and power structures because she presented them with the facts and forced them to reckon with its horrors.

Wells' constant pursuit of the truth did not stop with her journalism. In addition to reporting on facts in the newspaper, Wells traveled around the nation and the world informing citizens and local governments about lynching and imploring them to act against it. In 1893 and 1894, Wells traveled overseas to England on two speaking tours, where she garnered significant British support against lynching. This led to the creation of the London Anti-Lynching League, which pressured states in the American south to end lynching (Argyros 2019). In her talks, Wells discussed the findings of her research and emphasized that she sought not pity but fair trials for Black Americans (Staveley-Wadham 2021). Throughout everything, Wells continued to advocate for the importance of speaking truth. In *A Red Record*, which was published a year after Wells' travels to England concluded, she wrote, "the very frequent inquiry made after my lectures by interested friends is 'What can I do to help the cause?' The answer always is: 'Tell the world the facts.' When the Christian world knows the alarming growth and extent of outlawry in our land, some means will be found to stop it" (Wells 1895, 101). This advice further indicates Wells' strong belief in the power of the truth. She was certain that when presented with evidence as jarring as hers, the facts would speak for themselves and almost all people would commit to ending lynching. To Wells, speaking truth was central to fighting power.

Wells' advocacy and activism came at great personal cost, demonstrating even more the necessity of her work. Soon after she began publishing articles and editorials on lynching, a mob of white men destroyed the office of the newspaper she co-owned and threatened to murder her, forcing her to flee the south and live in exile. Still, Wells did not let this stop her, continuing to report on lynching and advocate against it. As one Black newspaper explained after the attack, "it is probable that these worthy people will be compelled to remain exiles for no other reason than the exercise of their rights of free speech" (Chase 1892). Wells herself wrote in *A Red Record*

that “threats cannot suppress the truth” (Wells 1895, 12). Despite losing most of her assets and being exiled from her home, Wells persevered in her mission because of her passion for spreading truth to end lynching. These attacks point to the immense need for Wells’ reporting of the facts. When those in power want to suppress the truth, it becomes even more important for the truth to be spoken.

In the years since Wells’ time, journalists have followed in her legacy of speaking truth to power to bring about social and political change. When *Washington Post* journalists uncovered President Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate Scandal, *Boston Globe* journalists revealed the molestation of children in the Catholic church, and *New York Times* journalists released The Pentagon Papers, they all spoke truth to power through journalism.

The most recent example, and perhaps the one most directly connected to Wells, of an activist using journalism to speak truth to power is Nikole Hannah-Jones’ *The 1619 Project* with *The New York Times Magazine*. *The 1619 Project* is a series of essays by journalists, historians, and other scholars that “aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of our national narrative” (Hannah-Jones 2019b). Following in Wells’ footsteps, *The 1619 Project* refutes common narratives of white supremacy, arguing that slavery is foundational to the United States’ history and emphasizing the importance of centering Black situations and contributions when studying history. The first essay in the project, written by Hannah-Jones, asserts in its title that “our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true” (Hannah-Jones 2019a) and is followed by numerous others criticizing aspects of American culture for not following through on ideals of freedom and democracy because of slavery. After its publishing, the project was met with immense pushback, with conservative

pundits and Republican politicians including the president denouncing it for being unpatriotic and calling for it to be banned. Hannah-Jones, who says frequently that “there’s no bigger influence on me than Ida B. Wells” (Arablouei et al. 2021), has not backed down. Like Wells, she has continued building on the project and informing more people of the true history she investigates because she understands that speaking truth is a vital aspect of counteracting white supremacy.

Journalism remains a powerful and necessary tool in speaking truth to power in the modern age. In every aforementioned case of investigative journalism, the reporters followed Wells’ pioneering legacy of pursuing facts to attain justice. By tracking down and sharing the facts, journalists like Wells and Hannah-Jones hold power accountable and raise awareness of issues in the world. Racism and white supremacist violence persist in the United States today, and these systems benefit from silence. Speaking truth to these hateful powers in the form of journalism is an extremely effective strategy for fighting them. Just as Wells’ reporting highlighted a lack of justice in our political system, *The 1619 Project* calls attention to the people responsible for American freedom and holds democracy accountable. Over a century before *The Washington Post* coined its motto that “democracy dies in darkness,” Wells lived by the same ideal. By speaking the truth, Wells used journalism to produce light.

References

- Arablouei, Ramtin, Rund Abdelfatah, Laine Kaplan-Levenson, Adriana Tapia, Lawrence Wu, Victor Yvellez, Anya Steinberg, Julie Caine, and Deb George. 2021. "Nikole Hannah-Jones and the Country We Have." National Public Radio. <https://www.npr.org/2021/11/17/1056618320/nikole-hannah-jones-and-the-country-we-have>.
- Argyros, Ariadne. 2019. "On the Road: Anti-Lynching Lectures Around the U.S. and Abroad." A Voice for Justice: The Life and Legacy of Ida B. Wells. The University of Chicago Library. May 8, 2019. <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/collex/exhibits/voice-for-justice-life-and-legacy-ida-b-wells/road-anti-lynching-lectures-around-us-and-abroad/>.
- Chase, W. Calvin. 1892. "Driven from Home." *The Washington Bee*, June 11, 1892. Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. Library of Congress. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84025891/1892-06-11/ed-1/seq-2/#date1=1892&index=3&rows=20&words=B+Ida+Wells&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1892&proxtext=Ida+B.+Wells&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1&loc=blogser>.
- Francis, Meredith. 2021. "Exposing the 'Thread-Bare Lie': How Ida B. Wells Used Investigative Journalism to Uncover the Truth About Lynching." WTTW Chicago. May 19, 2021. <https://interactive.wttw.com/chicago-stories/ida-b-wells/exposing-the-thread-bare-lie-how-ida-b-wells-used-investigative-journalism-to-uncover-the-truth-about-lynching>.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2019a. "America Wasn't a Democracy, Until Black Americans Made It One." *The New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2019b. "The 1619 Project." *The New York Times Magazine*, August 14, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/1619-america-slavery.html>.
- "Our Namesake." 2023. The Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting. 2023. <https://idabwellsociety.org/about/our-namesake/>.
- Staveley-Wadham, Rose. 2021. "Ida B. Wells – Speaking Tour to Britain 1893 & 1894." The British Newspaper Archive. March 24, 2021. <https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2021/03/24/ida-b-wells-speaking-tour-to-britain-1893-1894/>.
- Walker, Malea. 2020. "Ida B. Wells and the Activism of Investigative Journalism." Blog. The Library of Congress. February 12, 2020. //blogs.loc.gov/headlinesandheroes/2020/02/ida-b-wells-and-the-activism-of-investigative-journalism.

Wells, Ida B. 1892. *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases*. The New York Age Print.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/868f8db7-fa74-d451-e040-e00a180630a7#/?uuid=63dd1850-4abc-0134-786d-00505686a51c>.

Wells, Ida B. (1895) 1969. "A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States." In *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans*. Arno Press and The New York Times.