

#HandsUpDontShoot:

Studying Coverage of Ferguson as a ‘Critical Incident’ from Journalism’s Recent Past

Author: Patrick Walters

Status: Faculty (Assistant Professor)

Affiliation: Washington and Lee University

Email: pwalters@wlu.edu

Phone: 856-981-3156

Address:

Reid Hall 304

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

Washington and Lee University

204 W. Washington St.

Lexington, VA 24450

Abstract

This historical study of the “recent past” considers how a police officer’s fatal shooting of Black teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., served as a “critical incident” that forced journalists to re-evaluate their practices in the face of citizen journalism on social media. The author uses textual analysis to examine local and national news coverage of the shooting and subsequent protests and investigations over the following weeks and months, drawing on the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *The New York Times* and other outlets, as well as Twitter posts from citizens. The study, which places Ferguson in the historical context of breaking news coverage, finds the social media narrative initially impacted the shape of the coverage, especially in regard to reports of Brown having his hands raised. But the study finds the social media influence was limited over time as journalists ultimately reverted to their traditional reliance on official sources.