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Engagement and Control: Comparing Participation Structures in The Guardian and Washington Post's Coverage of People Killed by Police

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Engagement and Control

Transparency, Crowdsourcing, and Gatekeeping by the *Guardian* and *Washington Post* with Data Journalism about People Killed by Police

By Dan Michalski, Spring 2016

Committee:

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Scan for references, data, and additional information

Twenty-five was the first year with data to provide an accurate notion of people in the United States killed by police. As a series of videos hit public consciousness (Michael Brown, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Tamir Rice, et al.), journalists began seeking statistics and could not find any. Records kept by the Department of Justice (based on voluntary submissions from 4.4% of 17,000 law enforcement agencies) were woefully inadequate and scientifically invalid. Data journalism stood poised to fill that void.

Purpose of Study

Addressing a dearth of empirical evidence related to data journalism (DJ), I conducted comparative case study to more clearly define DJ practices and identify relationships relevant to *reader engagement*. My study examined "The Counted" from the *Guardian* and "Investigation: Police Shootings" in the *Washington Post*. Two respected media organizations' simultaneously pursuing essentially the same data set [1] presented a unique opportunity to study the DJ phenomenon.

Background

The *Guardian* champions itself as an innovator and leader in data journalism. Its editors have contributed to guidebooks and online classes that teach others (for free often) their methods and techniques. The *Washington Post* comes steeped in a successful history of investigative journalism (47 Pulitzer Prizes) built on standards set during Watergate that have since become enmeshed in journalism education. They are reliant on diligent cultivation of sources and "shoe leather" reporting to connect stories with high-level authorities and people in power.

Research Questions

- RQ₁ What do we currently know about data journalism and how researchers are studying it?
- RQ₂ How do the *Guardian* and *Post* enable or constrain reader participation in private and public spheres?
- RQ₃ What mechanisms exist in *The Counted* and *Police Shootings* that potentially mediate engagement between journalists, readers, and data?

Content Analysis

Using Herring's (2010) Web Content Analysis methodology and Coddington's (2015) typology for a starting framework, I operationalized thematic elements from his research and other literature (Lewis, 2013; Tandoc, 2014) and added sections for personal relevance (Miller, 2015) resonance (Benford & Snow, 2000), and gatekeeping (Domingo et al., 2008). I coded for presence, partial presence, or absence of these sometimes-overlapping elements.

Relevant Web pages scanned
Web destinations for coding
Web CA components

hundreds
12 *Guardian*, 12 *Post*
text, images, links,
features, graphic
design, video
54
Facebook, Twitter

Thematic elements
Social media

Personalized experience, personal relevance
Both offer intuitive dashboards for use of filtering, hovering, comparative selection, and data-on-demand to create an individualized data experience contributing to personal relevance.

Datafy. Taking digital information and putting it in a data form is critical.

Chronofy. Presenting a time frame is key to conceptualizing these data's storylines.

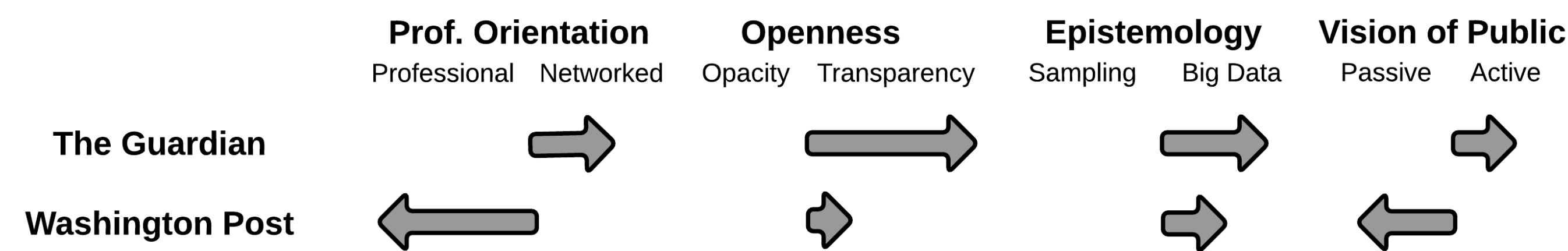
Personify. When data become a real person, connections on an individual level, perceived and real, intensify.

Narrify. In combination, the data have several stories to tell.

Ease of participation
Unassuming but intuitive buttons welcome user contributions at all levels, with indicators time is well-spent.

Social Engagement / Abandonment
On Facebook, the *Guardian* has a separate page for *The Counted*, while the *Post* has *Police Shootings* as part of the Investigations unit. Both *The Counted* (left) and the *Post's Investigations* (right) FB pages are open to visitor posts. *The Counted* engages in 2-way interactions with readers who send local news and video.

The *Post* does not engage, still has front-page posts dated in 2009, and has otherwise become like a public bulletin-board for off-topic sales pitches, conspiracy theories, and emergency notifications.



Professional orientation. *Guardian* embraces crowdsourcing and networked research. *Post* relies on "old fashioned" approach rooted in computer-assisted reporting and investigative journalism (Lewis, 2012).

Openness. *Guardian's* brand relies on transparency (sharing data, revealing methodologies) to convey credibility. The *Post* does not shun transparency but maintains opaque practices, such as downplaying data processes, and ignoring readers.

URL	Page	Page Category	Thematic Elements	Professional Orientation				Openness		Epistemology		Vision of Public	
				Prof. Orientation	Networked	Opacity	Transparency	Sampling	Big Data	Passive	Active		
http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/23/eric-harris	US News	Police Shooting	Police Officer Shot	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	
http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/ investigations/wp/2015/12/23/eric-harris-police-officer-shot-in-ohio/	Investigation	Police Shooting	Police Officer Shot	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	
http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/23/eric-harris	US News	Police Shooting	Police Officer Shot	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	
http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/ investigations/wp/2015/12/23/eric-harris-police-officer-shot-in-ohio/	Investigation	Police Shooting	Police Officer Shot	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	Present	

Epistemology. Both embrace Big Data methodologies and theory of $N=all$ (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). The *Post*, however, still finds good stories through sampling.

Vision of Public. This is an area of clear difference, with The *Counted* relying on an active public, *Police Shootings* gives the public tools but not other support to engender participation. (Domingo et al., 2013). Yet both, however, maintain separation.

Discussion

Engagement Variants

Not all reader engagements and engagement efforts were alike. Future research related to engagement and user experience may consider:

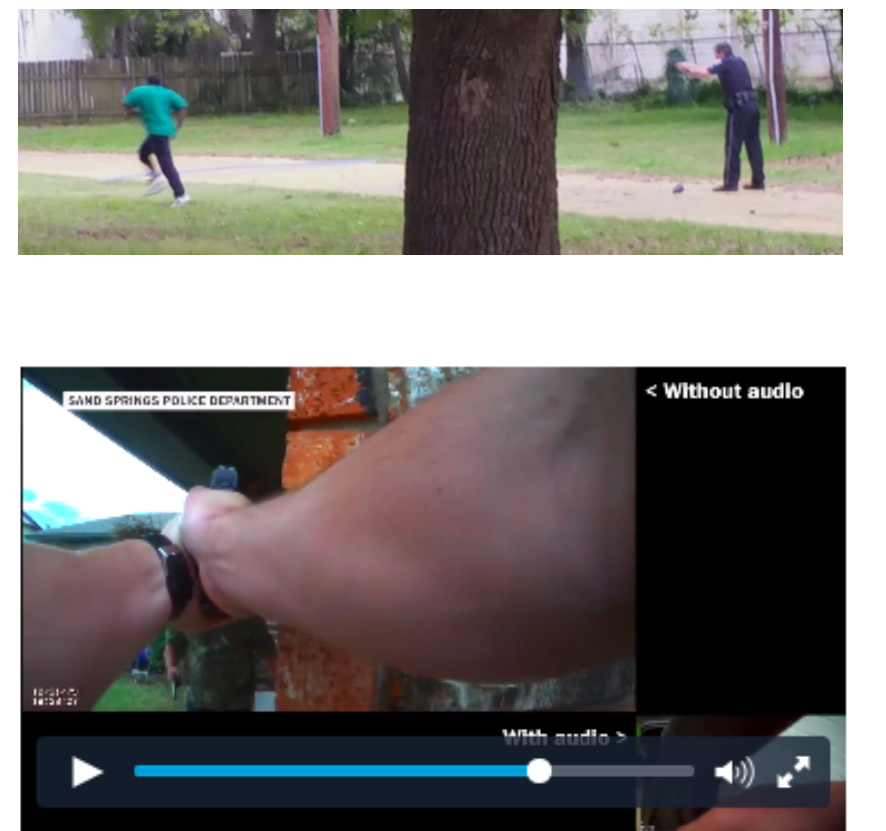
Private vs. public. Criteria for private engagement with data differs from public interactions with data and other people.

Personal vs. institutional. Engagement can occur with real people or anonymous, pseudonymous, or institutional representations.

Forced vs. optional. In some cases readers want control, in other situations not having to decide contributes to ease of participation.

Camera Implications

Research shows video to be an emotional driver (Hedley, 2013). 6% of people shot and killed by police in 2015 had their deaths captured on police body cameras, raising many questions regarding rights and access to such video data. What differences exist between civilian-captured video and police-captured video? What should be shared and how? Once a police killing is digitized, who's right and responsibility is it to datafy?



Data Lives Matter

Are there differences when your data set consists of real people, each with their own social network that continues post-mortem and now can connect other networks across multiple regions connected by a similar fate (Hess, 2013). What unique situations arise culturally and in efforts toward policy?



Limitations

- Iterative and tinkering natures of data journalism lead to page changes over time that challenge content analyses.
- Case study research not automatically generalizable
- Qualitative research does not determine causal media effects
- DJ forms in this study reliant on different business models

Conclusion

This study identified similarities and differences between two different journalistic approaches toward data of social import where no official source existed. The *Guardian* facilitated palpable connections between readers and data while the *Post* used similar tools yet maintained notable distance and perceived autonomy.

I do not assert superiority of one approach over the other, but the research does show how two publications connect differently with audiences in ways that suggest some efforts may be wasted if not counterproductive without proper resources and a shifting view of the public's role in journalism behind them. Further research is necessary.

[1] *The Counted* tracked all civilian fatalities at the hands of police, including deaths by Taser, vehicles, or other means while in custody. The *Washington Post's* investigation counted only people killed by police gunfire.

Keywords: data journalism, investigative journalism, content analysis, police shootings, crowdsourcing, transparency, gatekeeping

References: For a complete bibliography, scan the QR code above.