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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

Twenty-fifteen 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 (at 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 people and power 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 (2016) 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.

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.

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

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 it is to datify?

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?

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

[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.

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