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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

Twelve 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 Herrington’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.

Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: “The Counted” and “Police Shootings” engage readers differently.

Hypothesis 2: “The Counted” and “Police Shootings” embrace different journalistic approaches to data.

Hypothesis 3: The Guardian and Post engaged reader participation differently.

Hypothesis 4: “The Counted” and “Police Shootings” generated different engagements.

RQ1: What do we currently know about data journalism and how researchers are studying it?

- The Guardian and Post are the two most visible and frequently cited data journalism examples.
- Both have received significant media attention.
- The Guardian has a small team dedicated to data journalism.
- The Post has a larger team with diverse skills.

RQ2: How do the Guardian and Post enable or constrain reader participation in private and public spheres?

- The Guardian has a more open approach.
- The Post is more restrictive.

RQ3: What mechanisms exist in The Counted and Police Shootings that potentially mediate engagement between journalists, readers, and data?

- The Counted has a more user-friendly interface.
- Police Shootings is more complex.

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 datalify?

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 sources 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.

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