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Beyond “The Perfect Murder”: The Public Health Model of Homicide Reporting in Contemporary Open-Data Journalism

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The nature of mass media has changed from a centralized model of traditional journalism to a decentralized model heavily based on open-data and instantaneous social media communication. The Center for Homicide Research examined the issue of whether new forms of media follow best practices for reporting on and providing information on homicide. Researchers hypothesized that traditional media would more closely follow the public health model of homicide reporting relative to nontraditional media. This research highlights some of the risks of poor reporting on homicide, including bias in the criminal justice system, entrenched residential segregation, and public misinformation on the causes and realities of violent crime. We conclude that the highest quality homicide data sources and coverage still come from the top traditional journalism outlets.

Background

Journalists like Jill Leovy have pioneered the use of open-data in recent years to cover the topic of homicide, focusing on homicide in aggregate as a public health concern in their cities. “I decided to just list the homicides and to sort of give them as much equivalence as possible as sort of an anti-news story,” said reporter Jill Leovy, creator of the Los Angeles Times Homicide Project. Leovy continued by saying, “this is not a new story about the sensational case, about the case getting attention. This is just all of them stacked up in a row so that the reader can peruse them and get an idea of who’s dying.”¹ This signals a powerful trend in the way contemporary media covers homicide, and it is urgent for researchers to develop best practices for open-data that reflect the importance of this issue.

Media has tremendous influence and power in shaping the narratives that we use to understand the world in which we live. “If the world is not to be represented as a jumble of random and chaotic events, then they must be identified (i.e. named, defined, related to other events known to the audience), and assigned to a social context (i.e., placed within a frame of meanings familiar to the audience). This process—identification and contextualization—is one of the most important through which events are ‘made to mean’ by the media.”² The construction of narratives, coining of phrases, and framing of language may even affect the way we think and view reality, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests.

¹ Leovy, J., & Davies, D. (2015, January 26). “Ghettoside” explores why murders are invisible in Los Angeles. *Fresh Air, National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org>

² Hall, S. (1979). Policing the crisis: mugging, the state, and law and order. *Crime and Social Justice*, 12, 59–63.

Modern media has a large effect on the public's perception of crime and the justice system, and is frequently the primary way that they obtain information on this topic. "The vast majority of people in Western countries have no direct experience of crime...the media provide us with mosaics from which we build our personal reality." Apart from its effect on the public, the media also can directly affect the workings of the justice system itself – heavy media coverage of notorious or sensational crimes can reduce the chance of prosecutors accepting a plea deal, for fear of appearing lenient on crimes of intense public interest and concern. As such, it is of paramount importance that media cover homicide with care and responsibility.

Media Coverage of Homicide

Although homicide constitutes one of the least common crimes, it receives the largest share of media coverage of crime.³ The media tends to cover societies not based on adherence to the statistical norms, but on their deviance from it. For example, a study by Susan Sorenson discusses the Los Angeles Times' focus on victims who were "white, in the youngest and oldest age brackets, women, of high socioeconomic status, killed by strangers."⁴ In "Homicide reporting in Chicago dailies," the authors discuss that less than 1/3 of yearly homicides in Chicago were reported in one of the two major papers at the time of the study. Coverage focused on multiple victims, white victims, female victims, and notorious or sensational crimes. Homicide among black, Puerto Rican, and Chicano populations was treated as usual and natural occurrences, while homicide was treated as abnormal and incongruous among whites.⁵

This trend has been noticed and criticized for many decades. George Orwell satirized the tabloids' desire for the "perfect" respectable, suburban, bombastic crime to cover in his 1946 essay "The Decline of the English Murder."⁶ Conversely, some journalists have embraced this trend – Pat Doyle, a police reporter for the New York Daily News, said that "a good murder is when you have a prominent official who happens to be slain; a good murder is when you have a police officer shot to death or stabbed to death while on duty, or if an actress on her way home from the Broadway stage is shot to death," contrasted with bad murders, "the senseless junkie killings day after day on the Lower East Side."⁷

In his book *Using Murder*, Phillip Jenkins criticizes media focus on serial killing and notorious multiple-murder cases, arguing that these incidents attract such focus "not because they are intrinsically more dangerous or threatening, but because they are more 'useful' than others...the issue has been used as a multifaceted weapon in political debate."⁸ Though such sensational accounts may be useful for political narratives and sales of papers, the counterargument is that the media is responding to the public's genuine interest and sculpting their coverage accordingly. "There is a clearly a huge public demand for such accounts, to say nothing of the frequency with which the topic is covered on television documentaries and talk shows...partly in response to pressures emanating from the media and the culture at large, far more resources are devoted to tracking, identifying, and stopping the tiny number of serial killers than to preventing the great majority of routine homicide cases, in which victim and offender are related by marriage, kinship, or close acquaintance."⁹ The nonconsensual ending of one person's life by another is gripping, dramatic, evocative, and all-too-easily lends itself to both irrational individual fears and societal panics.

As shown above, the hazards of poor media coverage of homicide are troubling: the misallocation of resources to noncentral examples of homicide, the creation and maintenance of myths about crime and victims, the stigmatization of already-marginal neighborhoods, the ingraining of race prejudice, the promulgation of political narratives that reflect bias, and the confirmation of the tragic narrative that in this country some people's lives are cheaper than others. A society in which only some victims merit care and attention is an unhealthy one.

³ Sorenson, S., Manz, J., & Berk, R. (1998). News media coverage and the epidemiology of homicide. *American Journal of Public Health*. 88(10), 1510–1514.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Johnstone, J., Hawkins, D., & Michener, A. (1994). Homicide reporting in Chicago dailies. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 71(4), 860–872.

⁶ Orwell, G. (1946). *The decline of the English murder*. London: Tribune.

⁷ Johnstone, J., Hawkins, D., & Michener, A. (1994). Homicide reporting in Chicago dailies. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 71(4), 860–872.

⁸ Jenkins, P. (1994). *Using murder: the social construction of serial homicide*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.

⁹ *Id.*

The Public Health Model

To provide an alternative method for media to report on homicide, the public health model developed from the work being done by epidemiologists and medical professionals in the 1970s and 1980s. The public health model sees homicide as preventable rather than inevitable, and studies the risk factors and causes rather than as individual episodes divorced from context.¹⁰ Researchers like Jane Stevens and Esther Thorson have studied the public health model ported from medicine into journalism, in particular asking whether changing how media reports crime and violence can induce change in readers' perceptions of crime. "Violence should be considered in the same category as other deadly epidemics such as lung cancer and heart disease," Thorson writes. "Violence has definable risk factors, and most importantly, it is not inevitable but is potentially preventable."¹¹

Since 1977, upon realizing that suicide and homicide were some of the top causes of premature death in America, epidemiologists have tracked violence as a type of public health disease.¹² In 1985, U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop declared that "violence was as much a public health issue for today's physicians as smallpox was for the medical community in previous generations."¹³ Thorson and fellow researchers have attempted to analyze if and how the media was reporting on homicide from the public health perspective, and in particular ran a case study in the Los Angeles Times of whether reporters have faith in and the resources of money and time to use the public health model in their reporting of homicide.¹⁴ In this study, Thorson, Dorfman, and Stevens asked:

1. Can reporters do public health homicide reporting in a fast-moving environment?
2. Do they have an interest in doing it?
3. Is there space to do it, if they did?

This paper included examples of L.A. Times news stories on homicide rewritten in a public health model – longer, with more context. For example, a street gang shooting at a party was rewritten to discuss percentages of homicides involving youth, percentages of homicides involving an offender known to the victim, trends regarding access to alcohol and firearms correlating with homicide. Stevens and Thorson found that when framed in this fashion, mainstream publications may be very willing to adopt a public health model of homicide reporting and adjust their coverage accordingly.

Since 2003, Stevens and Thorson have not published any articles on this topic. Media has arguable changed immensely since 2003 with the rise of the internet, the ubiquity of information, and the tendency towards open data, leaving a gap in the literature. The promulgation of open data has been seen as a great boon for the public and a signal of government's dedication to transparency. It has also received criticism, both on the assumptions involved in accepting open data at face value, and on the occasional dehumanization, prejudice, and politicization that can result by viewing raw data without contextualization.¹⁵

Open Data Media

The nature of media has changed rapidly over the last several years, particularly with the rise of open-data reporting in the latter part of the decade of the 2000s. This trend is based on providing a large amount of data available for statistical analysis to the public. The trend for governments in the U.S. can be said to have begun in earnest in 2009 with the launch of Data.gov, a repository of both federal and local open data information for the purpose of "improved civic services, informed policy, performance planning, research and scientific discoveries, transparency and accountability, and increased public participation in the democratic dialogue."¹⁶ Some of the early adopters of open

¹⁰ Coleman, R., & Thorson, E. (2010). The effects of news stories that put crime and violence into context: Testing the Public Health Model of Reporting. *Journal of Health Communication*. 7(5), 401–425.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Stevens, J. (1998). The violence reporting project: a new approach to covering crime. *Nieman Reports*. 52(4), 37–42.

¹³ Dorfman, L., Thorson, E., & Stevens, J. (2001). Reporting on violence: bringing a public health perspective into the newsroom. *Health Education & Behavior*. 28(4), 402–419.

¹⁴ Rodgers, S., & Thorson, E. (2001). The reporting of crime and violence in the *LA Times*: Is there a public health perspective? *Journal of Health Communication*. 6(2), 169–181.

¹⁵ Ramos, E. (2014). A journalist's take on open data. *Beyond Transparency*. Retrieved from <http://beyondtransparency.org>

¹⁶ Impact (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.data.gov>

data information on homicide also began their projects around the same time – the Los Angeles Times in 2007¹⁷, and the New York Times in 2009.¹⁸ These projects provided internet-based geographic, demographic, and chronological data on homicide in their respective cities. Jill Leovy focused hours of work on the L.A. Times Homicide project and her book *Ghettoside* which came out in conjunction with this project, based on a view of open-data homicide in Los Angeles.

However, the push for open-data in journalism regarding violent crime frequently goes contrary to the established public health model for homicide reporting, resulting in a glut of data devoid of context. Technology has advanced faster than the surrounding social norms and standards, and a new configuration of the public health model is needed to maintain best practices in homicide coverage.

Open-data itself may face selection bias issues or inadvertently corrupted data masked by the veneer of trustworthy statistics and numbers. Jenkins discusses the problems around the Department of Justice’s data collection practices which led to the faulty statistics that there are over four thousand serial-killer homicides a year. Practices like counting by killer rather than by victim (for example, the 1969 Manson Family victims were each attributed redundantly to each of the perpetrators) and modern research’s inability to obtain legible data on 19th century and earlier crime leads to statistics that are useful for confirming a narrative, but not a reflection of reality.¹⁹

While such misused data may not be maliciously done, it can cause predictable and negative social effects. These can include scares and panics among the populace, a misdirection of government and public health resources to the most extreme and rare forms of crime rather than the most typical, and a justification for heavy-handed government response which may affect civil rights. “On one hand, it is incumbent upon social control agents to inform the public of the real danger that such individuals pose to the social order,” Jenkins writes. “On the other hand, we find that governmental agencies like the FBI and the U.S. Justice Department use their power to define the existence of serial murderers as a justification for their continued existence.”²⁰

“Big Data offers the humanistic disciplines a new way to claim the status of quantitative science and objective method. It makes many more social spaces quantifiable. In reality, working with Big Data is still subjective, and what it quantifies does not necessarily have a closer claim on objective truth.”²¹ When it comes to responsible use of open-data, the Justice Department has made mistakes, and so have media outlets. This becomes especially concerning given that frequently the open-data itself is used for articles which are in turn used for research. Mistakes, errors, and misinterpretations can compound each other under the assumption that data provides more legitimacy. There is no one standard to live up to, as the public health model has not been studied in conjunction with open-data homicide projects. This paper seeks to investigate whether the public health standard has been applied and how it can best be applied to modern open-data media.

Definitions

- Broadly, the “public health model” refers to a scheme of reporting homicides in which the media/reporters views homicides as not episodic occurrences for public consumption but as indicators of a problem in public health. This method contrasts coverage which focuses on context, patterns, causes of violence, with coverage that prejudices the sensational, that is exploitative, and that treats homicide as singular episodes rather than as part of larger patterns.
- “Journalism” as a concept is construed very broadly, and the evolution of journalism in the age of the Internet is a question that is at the heart of this paper, as it likewise pervades many other fields. Both traditional and nontraditional media are the subject of study, and some government-funded releases of open data, as also pertinent to this study.

¹⁷ Leovy, J. (2007). About page, Los Angeles homicide project. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://homicide.latimes.com>

¹⁸ Lehren, A., & Baker, A. (2009, June 18). In New York, number of killings rises with heat. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>

¹⁹ Jenkins, P. (1994). *Using murder: the social construction of serial homicide*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ Boyd, D., & Crawford, K. (2011, September). *Six provocations for big data*. Paper presented at the Symposium on the Dynamics of the Internet and Society, Oxford, UK.

- “Open-data” is defined as “digital information freely made available to the public in a manner amendable to reuse, modification, and sharing for any purpose.”²² Open data is a spectrum rather than a binary; some data may be shared in more accessible forms than others.
- “Homicide” shall encompass all interpersonal killings, both justifiable and criminal. One of the biggest topics of public interest and controversy in recent years is police-involved fatal shootings, and for the broadest understanding of data and trends it would be appropriate to include these in the study.
- “Scoreboard reporting” is a phrase coined by Elliott Ramos, referring to statistics-based reporting on homicide victims or numbers, which “stokes hysteria” and parochializes the issue of homicide to certain locales without providing context or information.²³

Methodology

The goal of this research report is to present a correlational study of twenty open-data homicide projects (including traditional media, contemporary Internet-based media, and city government data releases) and their adherence with best practices based off of the “public health model” of homicide reporting primarily developed by researchers Jane Stevens and Esther Thorson. Due to the nature of open-data, all twenty of these are accessible and searchable on the internet. Data is to be acquired by searching for terms on the Google search engine “homicide report,” “homicide victims,” “homicide map,” “murder map,” “homicide data,” and similarly phrased terms in conjunction with recent years to find the most popular open-data projects concerning homicide.

A) Variables and Data

The independent variables consist of twenty publications of open-data homicide reporting. Twelve are mainstream journalism (e.g., newspaper), four are nontraditional blog-form journalism, and four are government open-data releases. The list is provided on page six.

²² Caplan, R., Rosenblat, A., & Boyd, D. (2015). Data & civil rights: open data, the criminal justice system, and the police data initiative. *Data & Society*. Retrieved from <http://www.datacivilrights.org>

²³ Ramos, E. (2014). A journalist’s take on open data. *Beyond Transparency*. Retrieved from <http://beyondtransparency.org>

Name	Locality	URL	Public/private
New York Times	New York, NY	http://projects.nytimes.com/crime/homicides/map	Journalist
NYCCrime	New York, NY	https://maps.nyc.gov/crime/	Government
Murder Map UK	London, UK	http://www.murdermap.co.uk/	Blog
Chicago Tribune	Chicago, IL	http://homicides.suntimes.com/homicides/map/2016/	Journalist
Boston Homicide	Boston, MA	http://boston.homicidewatch.org/	Blog/University
LA Times	Los Angeles County, CA	http://homicide.latimes.com/	Journalist
Washington Post	Washington, DC	https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/local/homicides/	Journalist
Omaha World-Herald	Omaha, NE	http://dataomaha.com/homicides	Journalist
Times-Picayune	New Orleans, LA	http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/page/new_orleans_murders.html	Journalist
Mercury News	Bay Area, California	http://www.mercurynews.com/2016/09/16/bay-area-homicides-2016-map-and-details/	Journalist
Journal-Sentinel Homicide	Milwaukee, WI	http://archive.jsonline.com/news/crime/Milwaukee-Homicide-Tracker-367120481.html	Journalist
Minneapolis City Crime	Minneapolis, MN	https://communitycrimemap.com/?rms=Minneapolis_Crime_Map&type=simple&address=Minneapolis%2520MN	Government
HeyJackass	Chicago, IL	http://heyjackass.com/	Blog
Cincinnati City Crime Map	Cincinnati, OH	http://communitycrimemap.com/	Government
Baltimore City	Baltimore, MD	https://data.baltimorecity.gov/Crime/Baltimore-Homicide-Map-Reporting/47zk-t9h8/data	Government
Baltimore Sun	Baltimore, MD	http://data.baltimoresun.com/news/police/homicides/index.php?range=30&show_results=SEARCH+MAP	Journalist
MinnPost	Twin Cities, MN	https://www.minnpost.com/data/2015/12/mapping-every-2015-homicide-minneapolis-and-st-paul	Journalist
St. Louis Today	St. Louis, MO	http://www.stltoday.com/news/multimedia/special/st-louis-area-homicide-map/html_de6b77bad238-5afa-9ef5-492e72e86ade.html	Journalist
Washington Post Police-Involved Fatal Shootings	Nationwide	https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2016/	Journalist
Universal Hub	Boston, MA	http://www.universalhub.com/crime/index.html	Blog

The dependent variables are ten factors based on the public health model developed by Stevens and Thorson, guided by the concerns regarding ethical open-data propounded by Ramos. The factors are verbalized below in the form of questions:

1. Does this project intentionally set out to be a specific view of homicide, or is it incidental and part of a wider release of public data?
2. Is the data available for download by the public?
3. Are there supplementary or accompanying articles, rather than raw data and information?
4. Does coverage focus on the causes of homicide as a public health issue rather than homicides as individual “symptoms”?
5. Does coverage respect the larger context, rather than focus on episodic, sensational, or unusual cases?
6. Are names of victims published?
7. Are photographs of victims published?

8. Is demographic data published? (e.g. gender, age, race, et al.)
9. Is a nonconclusory narrative describing the crime provided?
10. Are there resources on how to report information about the homicide to authorities?

B) Hypothesis

In this paper I hypothesize that contemporary open-data media publications are not following best practices for homicide reporting as per public health standard. Further, I hypothesize that government data is of lower quality by the public health standard than both blogs and journalism. Government is less equipped to write in detail about context and causes, and due to its greater relative resources, higher historic standards, and perception of legitimacy by the public, that traditional “old-media” journalism’s coverage of homicide adheres most closely to public health model standards.

C) Limitations and ethical considerations

Homicide reporting straddles a difficult dilemma between what is a matter of public concern versus the privacy of victims and the civil rights of suspected offenders. This paper is designed not to offer a cutting critique of contemporary journalism, so much as to recognize that open data is a relatively new field where reporting standards are not set in stone yet. Victim’s families are harmed by exploitative coverage, and the public or the justice system may be harmed by irresponsible release of information.

Some of the standards for adherence to the public health are open to critique; demographic data is one that lends itself to controversy. Statistical variance in homicide commission and victimization can oftentimes inadvertently reinforce prejudice by race or ethnicity. The Los Angeles Times offers a compelling defense on demographic-based coverage, however, arguing that homicide is an issue that disproportionately affects some geographical and ethnic communities and a full picture of the data is needed to provide “the most complete and accurate demographic picture of who is dying, and in some cases, who the suspected killer might be. Race and ethnicity, like age, gender, and where you live, are stark predictors of homicide risk.”²⁴

Likewise, the inclusion of a Washington Post open-data project on police-involved fatal shootings could be criticized as against the spirit of a homicide map. However, “homicide” as a term refers to the taking of a life with no imputation of guilt, and police-involved homicides suggest the presence of unlawful deadly force notwithstanding the outcome. This could mean either deadly force by a citizen which justified the police shooting, or an unlawful police shooting of a citizen, as in several recent high-profile cases around the country. It would be a conspicuous and arbitrary departure from a matter of pressing public concern to omit this data.

Aside from the location of the data solely on the Internet, the data also pertains solely to cities; neither homicide nor journalistic resources are evenly distributed. Over half all U.S. homicides occur in cities with populations above 100,000, and newspapers across the country are similarly headquartered in urban areas²⁵; this focus on cities is a necessary limitation of the data caused by both the realities of homicide and journalism.

Results

The twenty open data projects are arranged below in the order of how many of the ten prongs of the public health model for open data they met. For some, partial scores were attained. For example, data is downloadable but only upon request, or when demographic data is provided but minus race and ethnicity, or when photos of victims are provided but with a focus on shock and gore – a defeat of the spirit of the question. Totals were calculated separately, one set of numbers allowing .5 point for partials, and another allowing zero due to the failure to fully attain that section of the rubric.

²⁴ Leovy, J. (2007). About page, Los Angeles homicide project. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from <http://homicide.latimes.com>

²⁵ Fox, J., & Zawitz, M. (2007). *Homicide trends in the United States: Bureau of Justice statistics*. Retrieved from <http://bjs.gov>

Name	Prongs met out of 10	Type
LA Times	10	Journalist
J-S Milwaukee	9	Journalist
WP Police	7 (1 partial)	Journalist
Murder Map UK	6 (1 partial)	Blog
Boston Homicide	6	Blog
Heyjackass	5 (3 partial)	Blog
NYT	5 (2 partial)	Journalist
Chicago Trib	5	Journalist
Omaha WH	4	Journalist
St Louis	4	Journalist
Baltimore Sun	3	Journalist
WP	2 (1 partial)	Journalist
NO TP	2 (1 partial)	Journalist
BA MN	2	Journalist
MP	2	Journalist
UH	1	Blog
Baltimore City	1	Government
NYCCRIME	1	Government
Cinci Crime	0	Government
Mpls Crime	0	Government

Numbers, arranged by type:

Journalist: 12
Government: 4
Blog: 4

Scores out of 10:

Average score (discounting partials): **3.75**
Average score (counting partials as .5): **3.975**

Mean scores out of 10, arranged by type:

Discounting partials:
Average score of public: **4.58**
Average score of government: **.5**
Average score of blog: **4.5**
Counting partials as .5:
Average score of public: **4.79**
Average score of government: **.5**
Average score of blog: **5**

Remarks on fulfillment of ten factors

1. Does this project intentionally set out to be a specific view of homicide, or is it incidental and part of a wider release of public data?

All governmental projects failed, and all nongovernmental projects passed. In every instance that a journalistic outlet had the ability to publish open data on homicide, whether traditional or nontraditional, there was a specific project created to host that data as part of a specific plan of crime coverage.

2. Is the data available for download by the public?

Four projects out of twenty provide downloadable data. A full score was granted to the Los Angeles times, despite the specification that data was only downloadable upon request. Both the New York and Baltimore city government homicide projects provided data for download, and the only other media than the Los Angeles Times to do so was the Washington Post Police Shootings project.

3. Are there supplementary or accompanying articles, rather than raw data and information?

Eight out of twenty provide accompanying articles for either the project as a whole (New York Times, Washington post) or in the best cases, on individual homicides (Murder Map UK, Omaha Homicide). As expected, governmental projects featured no supplementary articles. Surprisingly, the New Orleans Times-Picayune's homicide project featured a link to an accompanying article titled "More New Orleans Murder News," that led nowhere, resulting in a page reading "Sorry, no results."²⁶

4. Does coverage focus on the causes of homicide as a public health issue rather than homicides as individual "symptoms"?

Four out of twenty have coverage which focuses on the public health view of homicide or at least reasonably similar to it. The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, and Washington Post all view the homicide they cover as preventable and solvable, and posit reasons for its occurrence and prevalence – poverty, easy access to firearms, unemployment, racial segregation, personal psychological factors, even hot summer nights correlating with violence. The Journal-Sentinel muses on "gun violence [being] spread like a blood-borne pathogen"²⁷ regarding the trend of victims and killers frequently being part of a small and close-knit social group of relationships within any given city.

Heyjackass is a difficult project to parse as its mission defies the contours of what is thought of as public health. Heyjackass does view homicide as preventable, indeed showing how both homicide rates and police clearance rates for homicide have worsened to historic levels in many neighborhoods of Chicago, and how enormous this problem is for the city. In blog posts analyzing crime patterns, the authors opine about likely causes of high gun homicide rates – poor city government, ineffective police, restrictive gun laws, and a city without political will to take a hard stance towards killers. However, even in the same breath, the entire site is a veritable scoreboard of homicide and violence, treating the subject as a game or competition – immensely detailed charts illustrated with cartoons depicting numbers of shooting incidents, self-inflicted injury, shots to the groin and buttocks, multiple-victim shootings, and comparisons to other years laid out in a way that could be easily seen as mocking.

Despite the unusual name, Heyjackass has the most intricate statistical coverage of any project covering crime in Chicago. A partial point was awarded because of the overall tone of the site, which has elements of the public health model but an overall thrust towards shock value and entertainment.

5. Does coverage respect the larger context, rather than focus on episodic, sensational, or unusual cases?

Three projects focus on the wider context of homicide and depict the topic in unsensational ways, focusing on homicide qua homicide rather than unusual, shocking, or outrageous cases – these three projects are New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel, some of the projects with the highest scores overall.

Two projects were awarded partial points for reliance on the scoreboard model as described above – raw statistics themselves used to sensationalize or frame as a competition or sport. Heyjackass presents homicide in Chicago as a never-ending series of anonymous deaths, with photo galleries depicting a constant stream of (virtually all young and black) corpses dead in public streets and sidewalks. Likewise, the Washington Post Police Shooting project lists hundreds of killings with minimum detail provided – in both of these projects the scoreboard list itself provides the context for the vastness of the issue, but not in the typical fashion of the public health model.

6. Are names of victims published?

No governmental project published names of victims, and every other project did with the exception of Boston's Universal Hub homicide map. A partial point was given to the New York Times, whose coverage goes back to 2003, but does not publish any names of victims prior to 2008.

²⁶ Koenig, R. (2017) New Orleans homicide project. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Retrieved from <http://nola.com>

²⁷ Luthern, A. (2016, January 31). Homicides soar in Milwaukee, along with many theories on cause. *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel*. Retrieved from <http://archive.jsonline.com>

7. Are photographs of victims published?

Six projects out of twenty publish photographs of homicide victims; the projects are a mix of traditional and nontraditional media, with no government projects that publish photos. A partial point was given to Heyjackass, as it does publish photos of victims slain at their murder scenes. This is a point of conflict between the letter and spirit of the question. While photographs were intended to counter the dehumanizing “scoreboard” effect of homicide data, the freshly-killed photos of bloody victims lying on sidewalks and gangways in Chicago offer a different and more visceral method of dehumanization, though arguably it brings home the gruesome unavoidable reality of death.

8. Is demographic data published? (e.g. gender, age, race, et al.)

Eight projects out of twenty published demographic data (such as gender, age, race, neighborhood of residence, country of origin, or any other pertinent factor). Partial points were given to several that listed some demographic data but with conspicuous admissions such as race or age. No government projects provided demographic data on homicide victims.

9. Is a nonconclusory narrative describing the crime provided?

Eight projects provide narratives that go into detail about the victim and crime. Some of these do so by writing article-length pieces with follow-ups (Omaha, Murder Map UK), others with several paragraphs on the offense (St. Louis, Los Angeles Times), others by aggregating together different media coverage to provide a clearer story (Heyjackass).

Two projects provide a merely conclusory narrative. Rather than delve into cause and details, a conclusory narrative would be simple and seemingly mass-written on a template – “John Doe, 23, was shot multiple times and killed at 1st and Central” – oftentimes without any other identifying information, age, time of day, or context to the killing, therefore degrading a serious act into something commonplace, episodic, and meaningless. An example of this is MinnPost, whose homicide mapping project describes a murder that took place at 9th Street and Park Avenue in Minneapolis as “Demetri Randolph Manning, 51, was stabbed in the neck,”²⁸ with no other details or elaboration.

10. Are there resources on how to report information about the homicide to authorities?

Four projects out of twenty offer links or phone numbers for the public to report information on covered homicides to the authorities – the Los Angeles Times, Boston Homicide Watch, Murder Map UK, and Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel. Notably, the New York Times homicide project has a link for tips, but solely for viewers to point out patterns to contribute to the article, not to relay information on crime to the police.

This prong was not applicable to the Washington Post Police Shooting database project due to the inherent nature of what the project covered. Police-involved shootings are distinct from the typical homicide as the shooter is identified and immediately under investigation by likely an internal affairs bureau from the outset, not unidentified as in many street homicides.

Recommendations

Contemporary open-data homicide projects show extreme variance in how they succeed and fail on the standards of public health model standards. The variance is not based on the size of the city or newspaper. Small cities like Omaha (population approx. 430,000) had publications that took great pride in excellent coverage of homicide, while the Mercury-News which serves the California Bay Area (population approx. 7,150,000) had one of the lowest-scoring homicide projects, even in comparison to a metro area seventeen times smaller and with far lower concentrations of GDP, wealth, and media interest.

²⁸ Mannix, A. (2015, December 21). Mapping every homicide in Minneapolis and St. Paul. *MinnPost*. Retrieved from <http://www.minnpost.com>. From Minnesota homicide project linked above, regarding a homicide of May 2015 occurring at Park Street and South 9th Street in Minneapolis.

The data shows that the publications that scored the highest points were traditional media organizations; the lowest scorers were entirely the government-run sites. One of the oldest and most thorough, which set a standard for the rest, and was the original test grounds for the public health model is the Los Angeles Times homicide project. For nearly ten years this has been a dedicated and comprehensive work, which culminated in 2015's publication of reporter Jill Leovy's book *Ghettoside* on the issue of urban homicide, and the Los Angeles Times remains at the top of the pack.²⁹

However, this does not fully fit the hypothesis promulgated at the beginning of this research – the average score for nontraditional media was higher, though the best individual projects were traditional journalism. Both counting and discounting the partial scores, the nontraditional media had approximate .5 point edge against the traditional media. Though the highest-quality work comes from the traditional journalist outlets, this average score disparity speaks to the incoming trend towards media divorced from the traditional model.

Heyjackass was a notable outlier in the data, defying some categories while being some of the most analytical and data-driven, but also most exploitative and grotesque, of all the projects. This may underscore the need for best practices revolving around the public health model to be promoted as a norm for nontraditional journalist homicide projects. For all Heyjackass' shock and cynicism, the actual information they provide is some of the best and most in-depth, and it straddles a line of reliability that is indistinct in the age of open data.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the best homicide data analysis and coverage comes from the top traditional journalist sites. This quality work is likely boosted by the both willingness and interest in covering the subject and the presumed available budget of longstanding journalistic outlets. This is apparent from old traditional journalism outfits taking up the top of the rankings, but it does not tell the whole story. Why should a blog seemingly making its money soliciting PayPal donations like Heyjackass have a far more comprehensive and credible collection of statistics available for public review and download than an old journalistic outlet in an old American city like the Times-Picayune (founded 1837, average daily circulation 97,249^{30 31})? It seems that having enough passion, interest, and integrity in coverage of the data can make up for all the funding and prestige a traditional journalistic organization could supply when it comes to the coverage of homicide.

More work could be done in the future on the details of incentivizing good coverage in homicide and providing the tools to analyze data via the public health model, including meta-analysis of the trustworthiness of the data itself. For example, should open-data homicide projects question the validity of the data available to them as well as report on it? Due to jurisdictional issues, Washington DC does not count homicides committed on the subway³² in their official police statistics and Chicago does not count homicides committed on highways³³, and in recent years New York City has had numerous suspicious deaths reclassified as homicides months and sometimes years after the fact.³⁴ Accepting statistics provided by police or government at face value may be an abdication of journalistic responsibility given the perverse incentives that often lead cities to statistically manipulate their violent crime rate.

Conclusion

“News is a first rough draft of history,” the saying goes.³⁵ This reflects the truism that what is written in newspapers and blog posts today will be years from now seen as the narrative of the age in which it was written. Such responsibility to history and posterity as well as the present consumer of news should be heavy on the mind of anyone trying to cover a sensitive topic like homicide.

²⁹ Leovy, J. (2015). *Ghettoside: a true story of murder in America*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.

³⁰ Amoss, J., & Shea, D., (2011, August 2). New Orleans Times-Picayune has its roots in a newspaper-loving town. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Retrieved from <http://www.nola.com>

³¹ Griggs, T. (2015, January 27). The advocate overtakes the Times-Picayune as Louisiana's largest newspaper. *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Retrieved from <http://www.theadvocate.com>

³² Sun, L., & Layton, L. (2005, November 20). At Metro, some crimes don't count. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

³³ Randall, A. (2016, November 19). Chicago homicide rate reaches levels not seen in almost 20 years. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com>

³⁴ Parascandola, R. (2014, November 12). Unsolved and unsolvable. *New York Daily News*. Retrieved from <http://www.nydailynews.com>

³⁵ Graham, P. (1948, June 13). Platform of the Washington Post. *The Washington Post*.

The public health model was designed as a way to convey the gravity of homicide as a public health concern by depicting a contextual and realistic view of the problem, rather than homicide as highly individualized and dramatic cases. It is imperative that journalistic standards evolve with technology, and maintain equity in coverage rather than a disproportional focus on sensational and unusual homicides and atypical examples of homicide victims. The way the narrative affects reality is powerful: “That such images [regarding homicide] can still have such apparent force is a striking and instructive lesson for claims-makers themselves, who will apparently succeed to the degree to which they can plausibly make their particular issues respond to these visceral fears,” writes Jenkins.³⁶

Though violent crime in the United States has peaked and fallen since the 1990s, it remains a pernicious issue in this country beyond its impact in similarly-developed countries. This is true particularly within cities, and particularly within certain neighborhoods within cities where its scope is epidemic and clearance rates are shockingly low. So long as this persists as a constant misery affecting public health, journalistic enterprises no matter the size or type should strive for fairness, humanity, and adherence to the public health model in its quest for truth and understanding.

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³⁶ Jenkins, P. (1994). *Using murder: the social construction of serial homicide*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction.

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