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## Blog post #4: A summary of What's the deal with websleuthing

Posted on October 6, 2020 by Corrina

Yardley, E., Lynes, A. G. T., Wilson, D., & Kelly, E. (2018). What's the deal with 'websleuthing'? News media representations of amateur detectives in networked spaces. *Crime Media Culture, 14*(1), 81-109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016674045>

### Article summary

Per the biographies included at the end of the article (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 109), at the time of publication, all four authors held academic positions or directorships at Birmingham City University. They were also all connected in some way to the university's Centre for Applied Criminology either as director (Yardley), founding director (Wilson), deputy head of the homicide and violent crime research cluster (Lynes), or as a member (Kelly). All four authors' research centers on criminology, particularly that of homicide and violent crimes, and Yardley and Wilson are especially well-published. Yardley's research is of particular interest as it focuses on the role of network media in violent crime.

Yardley et al.'s article combines an exploration of the existing criminological literature around websleuthing, an examination of a conceptual framework for understanding websleuthing, and an empirical study of websleuths' representation in news media. From their deep dive into the criminological literature, two key terms can be teased out in relation to websleuthing: *digilantism* and *crowdsourcing for justice*.

- Digilantism* can essentially be described by breaking down the portmanteau: digital vigilantism. The authors draw upon the research of Trottier in the field of media and communication studies to highlight a key aspect of digilantism: "networked spaces facilitate decreased public confidence in state control over crime ... by opening up information flows, serving as gathering points for comment, serving as repositories for personal data and enabling peer surveillance" (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 84).
- Crowdsourcing for justice* is "where justice-seeking civilians collectively pool their expertise in response to real and perceived societal wrongs" (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 83).

The authors employ cultural criminology as a conceptual framework for understanding websleuthing. Cultural criminology:

concerns itself with the learned and shared values, attitudes and behaviours [sic] of social groups in relation to crime and deviance, exploring how crime and criminals come to be defined as such and how labelling plays out in a range of social spaces – virtual/networked spaces being of crucial importance. (Hardley, as summarized by Yardley et al., 2018, p. 84).

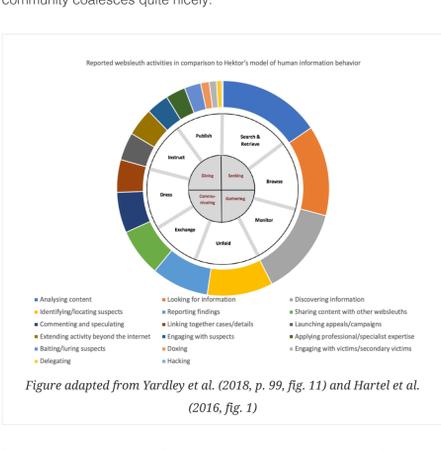
Cultural criminology is especially well-suited framework for understanding websleuths, because it: encompasses all forms of media, from print and television to the internet and social media; and includes "both media representations of crime and the use of media in constructing, maintaining and shaping identities and realities" (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 85). Moreover, the framework not only addresses the increased access to cases afforded by networked technologies, but the increased ability to share information also afforded by the medium (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 85). The authors also introduce the concept of *infotainment*, not only its history and recent proliferation, but how it is woven into the ideas of cultural criminology and its importance in the study of websleuthing (Yardley et al., 2018, pp. 85-86). Infotainment, the highly stylized and edited portrayals of factual information, is not a new concept. However, the level at which consumers can participate and engage with infotainment is new due to digital and networked media. Websleuths are a direct manifestation of both the proliferation of infotainment and the increased audience interaction with it.

The latter part of the article outlines the scope, methodology, and findings of their empirical study of websleuths' representation in news media. Through systematic searching of the Nexis news database, the authors narrowed down 97 news articles from seven different countries, spanning from 1998 to 2016, to use in their sample. The authors employed quantitative and qualitative techniques in analyzing their sample, starting by logging quantifiable data and then employing a tagging system to develop broader categories for the activities described. As the authors state, their approach enabled them "to explore both the quantifiable parameters around contemporary understandings of websleuthing as well as the more nuanced interpretations of the impact and implications of these activities" (Yardley et al., 2018, P. 88). Their study yielded a number of key findings about websleuths' representation in the media. However, in the interest of focusing on studying websleuths as an information community, I would like to highlight the following findings:

- As reported, the majority of cases investigated by websleuths are homicides, most likely due to its newsworthiness. However, websleuths were shown to investigate a wide variety of cases (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 88).
- Websleuths employ a number of online spaces, arguably primarily social media (Reddit, Facebook, Twitter), but also places mentioned in my previous posts (blogs, Websleuths.com, the Doe Network). These online spaces can be further categorized as: social media; chat; case specific; products and services; content sharing; search; other; maps; and messenger services. (Yardley et al., 2018, pp. 89-91).
- The majority of websleuths' activities center on analyzing content; looking for information; discovering information; identifying/locating suspects; and reporting findings (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 93-94).
- Websleuths' motives are wide-ranging, but four of them lend particular insight to the information community aspect of websleuths: achieve justice/closure; desire to uncover new leads/information; have been a victim themselves; sense of proximity to case (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 97).

### Insights

As the authors note, "Research around websleuthing is a bit thin on the ground" (Yardley et al., 2018, p. 83), especially when it comes to their information behavior. Nevertheless, some important connections between this article's findings can be made with existing models of information behavior, particularly that of Hektor's model of human information behavior (2001). I outlined websleuths' information behavior as it pertains to Hektor's model in my last post. There is a useful figure Hektor uses (Hartel et al., 2016) to show the modes and activities of information behavior. When you compare it with Yardley et al.'s findings about websleuths, their information behavior as an information community coalesces quite nicely:



This graphic needs some fine-tuning in order to include in my final paper, but it is useful to include here to show a deeper analysis of their information behavior and specific activities.

Yardley et al. explore websleuths from a decidedly criminological standpoint, but they incorporate a media and communications layer to their exploration that is particularly useful for studying websleuths' information behavior. It is important to also have this criminological framework because it provides a deeper understanding of the motivation behind websleuths' information behavior, as well as some of the outside influences that may be affecting their information behavior. Of particular note are the concepts of newsworthiness and infotainment and how they can be used to explore the biases of websleuths as an information community. My main takeaway about websleuths' biases are that they are a distillation of the overarching biases in media, which echo the larger issue of overall underrepresentation of marginalized groups. Sommers (2016) provides an in-depth analysis of a phenomenon known as Missing White Woman Syndrome, where the disappearance and murder of white women are disproportionately reported compared to the rate at which they actually disappear/are murdered compared to pretty much every other group (the indigenous women of Canada, black trans women, the Latinx community, for example). As we continue to strive for fair and equal representation, it is important that websleuths do the same with the cases they investigate. While Cooke's call is for a culturally competent librarian and librarians who strive for diversity (2016, p. 21), I think that call can be extended to websleuths. This provides a great opportunity for websleuths and LIS professionals to work in tandem towards a shared outcome and opportunity to include groups who are typically excluded from the discussion.

### References

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## One thought on "Blog post #4: A summary of What's the deal with websleuthing"

Michael Stephens says: October 7, 2020 at 3:53 pm (Edit)

Thanks for sharing the graphic. It will be interesting to see in your final paper. The point regarding speculation resonates – makes me think of Reddit and some of the communities there (Delphi Murders, etc).

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