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The Social Construction of Copycat Crime in Open Access Media

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Abstract

Examination of copycat crimes presented in digital mass media has important implications for understanding the nature of the contagion effect and its impact on potential copycat perpetrators in addition to understanding the impact of media-mediated crime on the public at large. While the crime content found in traditional legacy media has been extensively studied, open-access digital media crime content has not been well examined. Irrespective of a growing interest in copycat crime, there has been limited empirical research on the phenomena and none on open access portrayals of it. Addressing this research gap, the results from a one-day dedicated exploration of open-access data concerning copycat crime was conducted at Seattle University in 2018. Twenty students in twelve teams of 1 to 3 students collected open access data on copycat crime. The compiled open access copycat crime portrait was examined regarding crime types, perpetrator and victim characteristics, sources of copycat crime generators, and factors forwarded as causes of copycat crime. The findings suggest that open access content about copycat crime largely replicates the distorted portrait of crime in general found in legacy media. The relationship between millennials, open access data, and copycat crime is discussed.

Keywords: copycat crime, open-access, media, social media, millennials

The Social Construction of Copycat Crime in Open Access Media

How crime is portrayed in open access media is important for understanding the criminogenic effects of mass media in the digital age. The media depiction of crime has implications for copycat crime due to the potential of media images of crime generating contagion effects (Helfgott, 2015). In some cases, perpetrators of crimes who were themselves influenced by a copycat effect have subsequently gathered their own online following and generated second wave copycat crimes. For example, the case of the Columbine murders where Dylan Kleybold and Eric Harris provided role models for subsequent mass school shooters (Neklason, 2019) and Elliot Rodger, the perpetrator of the Santa Barbara mass shooting, became an iconic hero of the incel movement (Farrell, 2018). In addition, the prevalence of copycat crime is substantial with research suggesting that copycat crime is a common part of offender criminal histories with approximately 25% of offenders reporting that they have attempted a copycat crime (Surette, 2014a). Therefore, the examination of the elements of copycat crimes presented in open access media has important implications for understanding the nature of contagion in the social media age, its impact on potential copycat perpetrators, and the effect of media-mediated crime on the public at large.

Open access material is a unique type of media content that covers a broad range of social, entertainment, and political arenas, much of it created and consumed by younger persons (Blank, 2013; Madden et al., 2013; Smith, 2014; Smith & Anderson, 2018). The content of new media is composed of material lifted from the dominant 20th Century media technologies of hard copy print (newspapers, books and magazines), audio (recordings and radio), and image (television, films, and photography) media (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). New digital media incorporate these older media content into high speed, digital delivery platforms (Jenkins, 2014; Jenkins & Deuze, 2008). Thus, the major change from legacy to open access social media has been technological. The key difference between old and new media is not in content per se but in access to content, distribution of content, and creation of content (Surette, 2015a).

When the portrait of crime in traditional media has been examined it has consistently been found to be distorted with violent predatory criminals common (Surette, 2015a). This backwards portrait has been forwarded as supporting punitive criminal justice policies, generating pernicious public attitudes, and causing tolerance for crime and violence (Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Signorielli et al., 1995, Surette, 2015a). Social media have not escaped being linked to pernicious effects on crime and violent behaviors including on-line harassment, cyberbullying, cyber dating abuse, cyberstalking and revenge porn have been forwarded (Backe et al., 2018, Erreygers et al., 2018). Further indicating the impact of social media, the use of social media by criminal justice agencies in anti-crime projects has expanded (Williams et al., 2018, Meijer & Thaens, 2013) and the impact of social media on public perceptions of police has been noted (Bullock, 2018; Grimmelikhuijzen & Meijer, 2015; Hu & Lovrich, 2019; Huang et al., 2017; O'Connor, 2017, Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). Specific to this study, copycat crime has been linked to open access content found in YouTube videos (Surette, 2019).

In general, media influences on copycat crime have been described as residing along a continuum.ⁱ Media content can play a minor role (such as getting an idea from a movie for a real-life crime) or media can play a major role when criminal drives, motivations, tactics, and the nature of offenses are copied (Helfgott, 2015). Heightening these effects, digital media technology has reduced the social distance between people, created new mediated relationships, and given contemporary media the power to shape criminal behavior. Thus, open access copycat crime content is likely an important criminogenic generator. One copycat crime wave has already been linked to open access content linked to YouTube videos (Surette, 2019).

While the crime content found in traditional legacy media has been extensively studied, more recent open-access media crime content has not been examined. This is an important research gap as millennials and post-millennials rely heavily on social media and digital news to construct their worldviews (Barthel, 2019; Boyd, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Rosenstiel et al., 2011; Pearson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2018; Prior, 2005; Roache et al., 2016; Smith & Anderson, 2018; Surette, 2017; Young, 2019). The emergence of open access social media eased the sharing of content and decentralized the creation and distribution process which led to powerful social effects (Jewkes, 2015; Smith, 2014). Although content comes from physically distant sources, in social media content feels like it is coming within a close personal conversation (Helfgott, 2015; Surette, 2015b). Ironically, while crime related content is as ubiquitous as ever, due to consumer self-selection of content, exposure to discussions of crime have narrowed as consumers homogenize and limit their sources of information (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). One social effect is a large general knowledge gap where self-censoring consumers feel they know a lot about a narrow set of subjects based on a small number of sources (Roche et al., 2016, Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). In addition, contemporary social networking sites tend to be organized around people, not interests, meaning that detailed follow-up searches, fact checking, and discussions of content are limited (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).ⁱⁱ This means that most web surfers will have only a temporary, shallow interest in crime related topics, limited to a single event, uncovered in a haphazard surreptitious manner while surfing. The resultant truncated exposure to a topic in open access media is important because media consumers use the information to socially construct their beliefs about specific elements of the world (Callahan & Rosenberger, 2011; Roche et al., 2016; see also Barak, 1995, Best, 1995; Gergen, 1999; Jenkins, 1994; Potter & Kappeler, 2006; Spector & Kitsuse, 1987). Because most people have very little direct experience with crime and justice, the media play a particularly crucial role in the construction of crime and justice (Surette, 2015a). Despite a growing interest in copycat crime, there has been limited empirical research on the phenomena (Helfgott, 2015) and none on its open access portrayals. Only one dated anecdotal book by Coleman (2004) on the subject exists and while there are numerous content analysis studies on how crime and justice is portrayed in legacy media (see Surette, 2015a for a summary overview), few studies have examined internet sources (Britto & Noga-Styron, 2014; Roche et al., 2016). No research regarding the portrait of copycat crime residing in contemporary open access content was found in the extant literature. Therefore, a number of basic research questions regarding copycat crime's portrait in open access media remain unaddressed including: what types of crimes are found, what are the characteristics of perpetrators and victims, what are the sources presented as copycat crime generators, and what factors are forwarded as causes of copycat crime? In sum, what an individual would find regarding copycat crime in a typical search of open access media has not been explored.

The unprecedented role that media play in modern society raises concerns about their role in shaping crime, molding public beliefs about crime, and driving criminal justice policies (Helfgott, 2015). To comprehend social media's current crime and justice impact a necessary first step is to examine the easily accessible and hence most likely to be consumed content about crimes and criminals (Surette, 2017). Given the public's interest in high profile copycat crimes and social media's centrality in modern mass communication, it is of interest what the construction of copycat crime is within open access data. As people turn more to open access sources for their world constructing knowledge, what are they likely to find regarding copycat crime is an unexplored but significant research question.

Addressing this research gap, the results from a one-day dedicated exploration of readily available open-access information about copycat crime was conducted at Seattle University in 2018. Copycat crime was selected due to it being a phenomenon that is little discussed in legacy media research but can be easily discovered in digitized open access searches (Helfgott, 2015; Surette, 2017). A focused Internet-based search

regarding copycat crime provided a non-random but comprehensive sample of what typical searches of the world wide web would deliver. Retrieved from open access, no-fee World Wide Web sites, this material represents the information most net surfers would be exposed to and use when formulating their beliefs and perceptions of copycat crime and, in turn, direct their policy positions regarding the media and copycat crime (Surette, 2017).

Method

The data was collected as part of a “live” data collection event entitled “Copycat Crime Research-a-thon” sponsored by the Seattle University Department of Criminal Justice Crime & Justice Research Center.ⁱⁱⁱ The event featured guest speakers who spoke about crime and media including the authors and local criminal justice and media professionals from the Seattle Police Department, the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, the Seattle Times, and the Seattle University Criminal Justice and Film Studies Departments. Students were invited to participate in a volunteer data collection activity where they could win prizes including gift certificates, movie poster, and swag items. Participation was solicited via flyers emailed to undergraduate and graduate criminal justice students.

Participants

Participants were 20 undergraduate criminal justice students who worked in 1-4 person teams with a total of 12 teams. The students were instructed to collect open-source data about copycat crimes. Prior to the event, students were provided with instructions and several articles to read including Helfgott (2015), Surette (2016), and O’Toole et al. (2014). Students were instructed that the goal of the event was to identify and code as much information about copycat crimes as possible using open-source data and that teams would earn points based on the number of cases they identify and accurately code. Students were given an operational definition of copycat crime: *A crime inspired by another crime that has been publicized in the news media or fictionally or artistically represented whereby the offender incorporates aspects of the original offense into a new crime.* They were instructed that the crime type could be homicides, arsons, aggravated assaults, robberies, or others; that the crimes could have occurred in any time period anywhere in the world; and that media could include but was not limited to movies, television shows, books, music, social media, and other crimes reported by the news media. In terms of their demographics, two were male and 18 were female and they ranged in age from 18-22. All would be considered “millennials” born after the mid-1990s.

Procedure

The students were provided access to an online data entry form developed using Qualtrics survey software. Detailed instructions were provided (see Appendix A) regarding what types of events should be included or excluded from their lists of potential copycat crimes. These instructions read:

A copycat crime is: A crime inspired by another crime that has been publicized in the news media or fictionally or artistically represented whereby the offender incorporates aspects of the original offense into a new crime. Please enter data collected from open source information for crimes you can find that fit this definition in open source information. Complete the data entry in as much detail as possible entering each case individually. There is opportunity throughout to enter

additional details/narrative data associated with response choices... Your search should focus on copycat behaviors legally defined as crimes anywhere in the world at any time in history to the present. Do not include copycat suicides in your search (While suicide is a crime in some parts of the world, it is not a crime in most western countries). You can start with the following base key words: "Copycat Crime," "Copycat Effect," "Copycat Effect on Criminal Behavior," "Mimetic Crime," "Media-Mediated Crime," "Media-Mediated Criminal Behavior," "Crime and Mimesis," "Media Influence on Crime," "Media Influence on Criminal Behavior." However, you will need to enhance your searches methodological creativity and with your own key words dependent on your case.

The students conducted open-source searches using these instructions to identify and collect information on the events, they were not provided a pre-researched list of potential copycat crimes as part of the research process was to determine how many events could be identified using open-sources.

A day-long focused open-access search identified 79 possible copycat crime events culled from free online open access sites by 12 Seattle University student teams (see appendix B). Data were collected in a one-day effort Saturday, 2 June 2018 from 9 AM to 6 PM in a conference room in Seattle, Washington, on the Seattle University campus. The average time spent collecting and recording information on each case was 1 hour and 50 minutes. The occurrence year for the discovered copycat events ranged from 1974 to 2018. The year that the generating copycat crime source material was created ranged from 1965 to 2018. For example, the 1965 film based on the 1963 novel *The Collector* by John Fowles was described as the source for homicides committed in 1984 by Robert Berdella. Older legacy media content was discovered to have often been digitized and made available within open access sites. Concerning how these events were labeled, about 26% of the cases were found to contain the exact words 'copycat' or 'copycat crime' in their related online content. More than half were not specifically identified as copycat crimes but were nevertheless flagged in searches using copycat crime related search terms such as copycat, copycat crime, famous copycat killers, and famous copycat crimes. After a specific case was identified subsequent follow-on open access searches were conducted utilizing case identifiers for specific cases such as Columbine, *Scream*, *Hinckley*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *Devin Moore*.

It should be emphasized that the content retrieved, and information collected and coded, was not expected to accurately portray the reality of copycat crime. First, as prior content analyses of crime media have repeatedly found, media portraits present backwards biased portraits of crime and justice (Surette, 2015a). There was no reason and it was not expected that open access media would differ and it was expected that the events uncovered would emphasize violent newsworthy crime. Second, the collected information represents how the student teams interpreted the content they uncovered adding an additional subjective element as other groups may interpret the content differently. Noting that caveat, the data provided measures of how copycat crime was portrayed in digitized open access content, not how copycat crime might exist in reality (Surette, 2014a). When the 79 discovered copycat crime cases were aggregated and examined in detail, they coalesced around a set of crime defining characteristics. Analysis was conducted along four dimensions. First, the portrait of copycat crime in open access media is described regarding the characteristics of the crimes, crime types, and weapon use. Next how copycat crime offenders and victims and their relationships are portrayed is examined. Third, how the dispositions of the uncovered copycat crimes is presented is analyzed. Last, the generating sources of the copycat crimes and the roles of legacy and new media examined.

Results

The Portrait of Copycat Crime in Open Access Content

What copycat crime characteristics did the students coders cull from the open access sources? Reported in Table 1, the characteristics of the retrieved crimes were predominately perceived as pre-planned (75%) with just 1 of 5 seen as spur of the moment crimes. Additionally reflecting pre-crime planning, the motivation for most of these crimes was interpreted as goal oriented and the crimes as instrumental and predatory. Along the same lines, the perpetrators of these crimes were most often seen as violent predatory criminals. The pre-planned crimes match the types of crimes presented in entertainment crime dramas and those chosen for infotainment reality crime shows and as such a correspondence emerged between the open access renditions of copycat crime and the long-standing but biased media portrait of real-world crime and justice. Ninety-four percent fall within a media trials typology of “evil strangers,” “sinful rich,” and “abuse of power” described by Surette (1989, 2015a). Further emphasizing the focus on violent crimes, weapon choice was dominated by guns and knives which were employed in over half of the 79 events. An eclectic unusual set comprises an additional 24% of the weapons including poison, paint, bats, hammers, gasoline, bombs, and torture. Three events or less than 1 in 20 involved no weapons. Eight or about 1 in 10 employed direct physical or sexual coercion.

Table 1: Open Access Copycat Crime Characteristics (n= 79)

	<u>Percent</u>
(characteristics)	
Spur of the moment	21.5
Pre-Planned	72.2
Unknown	6.3
Instrumental/Predatory	74.7
Expressive/Affective	20.3
Unknown	5.1
(crime type)	
Violent (assault, robbery, murder)	73.4
Sex (rape, molestation, sexual assault)	7.6
Public Order (drugs, dui, prostitution)	6.3
Economic (theft, fraud, white-collar)	3.8
Political (treason, hate crime, genocide)	3.8
Other/unknown	5.1
(weapon used)	
Firearm	32.9
Knife/blade	22.8
Physical/sexual coercion	11.4
Explosive	7.6
Blunt instrument	7.6

Poison	6.3
No weapon	3.8
<u>Other/unknown</u>	<u>13.9</u>

Information concerning perpetrators was extracted for up to four copycat crime offenders identified in 78 of the 79 cases (one event entailing a failed bombing remains unsolved) for a total of 123 individuals. The average number of offenders per crime was 1.5, the median was 1. Solitary criminal actors were typical with about two-third of the cases involving single offenders and an additional 23% committed by a pair of offenders. Group crimes were rare as only seven events had 3 or more offenders.

Demographically, their Mean age=24 (*Median*=22, *Mode*=25) and ranged from 10 to 66. The gender for the 123 offenders included 105 males (85.4%) and 18 females (14.6%). Race or ethnicity was mentioned in the content for 79 of the 123 offenders. The great majority, 73, were white (82.0%) with 9 black, 4 Latino, 2 Asian, and 1 mixed Hispanic and Asian offender reported. In addition to the examination of gender and race of perpetrators, the socioeconomic status (SES) of an offender or for the group for multiple offenders was assessed where possible. The offender’s socio-economic status could not be estimated in 44 cases; fifteen of the offenders were minors or students whose SES could not be determined and in another 29 cases SES was not reported. Where SES could be derived, the adult copycat offenders were evenly divided among low (50.0%) and middle-income (47.7%) classes; only 1 case involving a high SES perpetrator was identified. Similar to SES, the general education was assessed for the lead offender or group for multiple offenders. As with SES, the discovered content for a substantial number of cases did not provide information regarding offender education and education could be assessed in just 48 (57%) of the 79 cases. For those individuals where education was determinable, reflecting their youth and for some their status as students, about 2/3 of the copycat offenders had not graduated from high school. Having attended college was a characteristic of less than 1 in 5 offenders (17.8%).

Collectively, the demographics for the copycat offenders reflect that copycat crime in this content was for the most part a youthful, white, male endeavor carried out by individuals lacking extensive formal education. The overall demographics for the portrayed perpetrators of these copycat crimes portray offenders that most frequently offended alone rather than in a group. They spanned a wide age range but were collectively youthful. In these events, males were significantly more likely to be perpetrators and Caucasians were more likely to be portrayed as offenders than other races. Socioeconomic status and education levels were not coded for the majority of offenders but when noted, middle and lower class and lower educated perpetrators (confounded with school-age offenders) were common characteristics. In gist, these copycat crime offenders were less demographically diverse than offenders reflected in official statistics with white males common in the open access content. How much this difference reflects coverage bias rather than criminality is not known but their demographics construct a portrait that mirrors the predatory lone wolf criminal commonly portrayed in entertainment media (Surette, 2015a).

Similar to the commonality of lone perpetrators, copycat crime victims were concentrated in single victim events which comprise nearly half of the cases. However about 3 in 10 were crimes involved 5 or more victims and about 2 in 10 involved mass victimization events of 10 or more. Overall, the victim number range ran from 0 to 143 (the crime with zero victims was a failed bombing). Reflecting the influence of events with extreme numbers of victims, these crimes averaged 10.3 victims whereas the medium number of victims was 2 and the mode was 1. Regarding fatalities, 21 of the events (27 %) did not involve a fatality. For those with fatalities, the number killed ranged from one to 77 with an average of 4.7 killed per event, again reflecting that

impact of a few high fatality crimes. A more general focus in this content on low or non-fatality crimes generated a median and modal number of fatalities of 1.

Ranging in age from 2 to 78, victims were in general older and more widely distributed in age than the offenders. One-fourth of the victims were 45 or older and an additional one-fourth 20 or younger. Despite a substantial number of young victims, overall victim age averaged 32.7 (median 32.3). Where gender was reported, unlike the perpetrators who were predominately male, for the victims about half were female (46%) and half male (54%). Noting that victim socioeconomic status ($n=33$) and education ($n=26$) were not frequently reported, middle class victims and those with less than high school educations (reflecting the number of student victims) comprised the majority in each demographic. Regarding race, 7 of 10 victims in the data (69%) were Caucasian followed by 17% classified as multiple racial and ethnic group members. African Americans (6%) and Hispanics (2%) comprised small percentages of victims.

Table 2 reports an additional victim related variable – the relationship between victim and offender – for the limited number of instances where it was determinable. Nearly half of the victims were described as strangers to their copycat perpetrators, followed by friends, family members, and fellow students.

Table 2: Copycat Crime Victim/Offender Relationship (n=73)

<u>Relationship</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Stranger	46.6
Friend	20.5
Family Member	13.7
Student	11.0
Organization	6.8
Suicide	1.4

The overall demographics for the victims of these copycat crimes portray people that were most frequently victimized individually rather than within a group. They were selected across a wide age range but were collectively older than the copycat offenders and a substantial number were youth. In these events, males and females were equally at risk. Caucasians were more likely to be victimized than other races, but this difference likely reflects coverage bias rather than victimization rates. Socioeconomic status and education levels were not coded for the majority of victims but when noted, middle-class victims and less educated victims (confounded with younger victims) were common characteristics. In gist, these copycat crime victims were more demographically diverse than their associated copycat crime perpetrators. Their diversity, comparatively higher social status, education, simultaneous youthfulness and older age, and a substantial number of females when combined with the crime and perpetrator characteristics construct a portrait that mirrors the ideal victims and offenders described by Christie (1986) and Greer (2007) of innocent, helpless victims preyed upon by violent predator criminals. This construction of copycat crime is felt to have increased the newsworthiness of the associated crimes and their likelihood of inclusion in open access content.

Copycat Crime Dispositions

An additional research question of interest is how the processing of these crimes by the criminal justice system is presented. Table 3 indicates that the majority of these crimes had been closely followed through their

criminal justice system journey. Spurred by the substantial number of offenders who were alive and available for post event criminal justice system actions, three of four had been processed into the criminal justice system and reported as either arrested, convicted, or sentenced. Sentencing, the processing point that most often effectively ends media attention and closes the criminal justice book on a case (Surette, 2015a), was by far the most commonly reported disposition and reported in more than half the cases. A minority of about one in 10 cases resulted in mental health placements or other non-criminal justice dispositions. Suggesting an incredibly high law enforcement success rate, only 1 of the 79 cases was reported as unsolved. The criminal justice dispositions found reflected that a majority of these offenders were alive (89%) following the crimes and many (43%) were available for interviews. Their availability is a likely driver as why these cases were found in open access sources. Availability and interviews increased the newsworthiness of these cases by providing an individual who could be profiled and covered post crime and often directly accessed.

Table 3: Case Dispositions (n=79)

<u>Disposition</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Sentenced	58.2
Arrested	20.3
Mental Health Facility	11.4
Deceased	6.3
Convicted	2.5
Unsolved	1.3

The Portrait of Copycat Crime Generators

Concerning the sources credited with providing the motivation and instructions for these copycat crimes, Table 4 reports that movies were the most credited media source and were linked to nearly half of the crimes. This attribution of movies matches the most common copycat crime source reported by incarcerated copycat crime offenders reported by Surette and Maze (2015). The second more common idea source was not a specific type of media but a link to a prior crime and criminals, found in about one-fourth of the events. Regarding whether the channels were legacy, new media, or interpersonal through which these copycat modelers of prior crimes offenders learned about the prior crimes was not discernible. Video games and varied other copycat crime sources were cited in 10 percent of the cases.

Table 4: Source for Crime Idea (n=79)

<u>Source</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Movies	50.6
Prior Crime	24.1
Video Game	10.1
Book	7.6
Television	6.3
Music	1.3

The explanations for the copycat crimes imbedded in the open access content typically portrayed these crimes as multi-faceted events. Only 15 cases were interpreted by the coders as caused by a single factor with the large majority (81%) described as complex multi-causal events. Contrary to the born criminal trope commonly found in the entertainment media (Surette, 2007), biological factors were rarely seen as explanatory, but the psychological based irrational mentally unbalanced predator did well as an explanation. When multi factor cases were disaggregated, 64.6% ($n = 51$) included psychological factors, 54.4% ($n = 43$) phenomenological, 46.8% ($n = 37$) routine activity, 38.0% ($n = 30$) sociological, 24.1% ($n = 19$) cultural and 7.6% ($n = 6$) biological. ^{iv} Following psychological explanations, phenomenological or personal symbolic meaning of the crime to the offender was perceived by the student coders in about half the cases.

A final question regarding how these copycat crimes were constructed was – What were the sources of information the student teams tapped to formulate their copycat crime portraits? Were they concentrated by number or type, or were multiple and varied sources utilized? When the number of open access sources was examined the number of sources utilized ranged from 1 to 10. The average number of sources referenced was 3.4 with 8 cases reviewed based upon only 1 source.

Beyond the number of sources tapped per case the role of legacy media associated sources versus new media sources was of interest. As open access World Wide Web based searches, were legacy media blocked as information sources? To address this research question, open access sources connected to legacy media were distinguished from new media sources. Thus, television network news sites and sites maintained by newspapers were deemed as legacy linked; independent blogs, news-letters, chat rooms, and dedicated crime sites were grouped as new media. Based on this distinction, regarding whether the students relied upon sources linked to traditional legacy media or new media sources was examined with results reported in Table 5. Despite these searches being constrained to digital open access content, legacy media remained a significant information source via their open access through put. In about one in five cases no legacy media was used but in more than half the cases (54.4%) one to two legacy media sources were tapped.

Table 5: Number of Legacy Linked Media Sources Used (n=79)

<u># Sources</u>	<u># Cases</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cumulative %</u>
0	15	19.0	19
1	21	26.6	45.6
2	22	27.8	73.4
3	7	8.9	82.3
4	6	7.6	89.9
5	6	7.6	97.5
6	2	2.5	100

Reported in Table 6, when the proportion of legacy versus new media sources used per case was examined, at one end 19% used only legacy media and at the other end 28% used only new media sites. In 33% of the cases, new media comprised between 1/3 - 2/3 of the sources. In gist, while new media sites were more often utilized, legacy media linked content was also frequently tapped through digitization of its content.

Table 6: Proportion of New Media to Legacy Media Sources (n=79)

<u>Proportion</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Cumulative %</u>
.00	15	19.0	19.0
.20	1	1.3	20.3
.25	3	3.8	24.1
.33	6	7.6	31.6
.40	3	3.8	35.4
.50	10	12.7	48.1
.67	7	8.9	57.0
.71	1	1.3	58.2
.75	5	6.3	64.6
.80	4	5.1	69.6
.83	1	1.3	70.9
.86	1	1.3	72.2
1.0	22	27.8	100

As it is common for crimes to be characterized as copycats when they are not (Helfgott, 2015; Surette, 2016), a final research question explored was how valid were these events perceived by the research teams as true copycat crimes? In this study, the coders were asked to assess these 79 events as substantiated or not substantiated copycat crimes. To do so they calculated “copycat crime likelihood scores” for each event using Surette’s (2016) copycat crime scoring protocol and an assessment of an event based on 7 copycat crime characteristics (time order, theme consistency, scene specificity, repetitive viewing, self-editing, offender statements, and second party statements). Events that scored low were deemed as unsubstantiated regarding their likelihood of being true copycat events, high scoring events were deemed as likely valid copycat crimes.

Overall on Surette’s (2016) 0 to 1.0 scale, the 78 cases averaged a .58 with a median score of .56. One case showed none of the 7 copycat crime characteristics and was scored at 0.0 points and 3 cases were seen as reflecting all of the copycat crime traits and were scored 1.0. Overall, one-fifth (15) of the events scored in the low unsubstantial group, one third (29) in the possible range, and slightly less than half (44%) were scored in the substantiated group and could be reasonably described as validated copycat crimes. This suggests that open source sites provide information about likely real copycat crimes, however possible valid copycat crime information is intermixed with a significant number of questionable events that were also presented as copycat crimes. Additionally, it is highly unlikely that the exercise uncovered a representative set of all copycat crimes, as the plurality that were deemed valid were also highly unusual violent crimes.

Discussion

While information about real copycat crimes appear to be readily available to anyone with an Internet connection, the information obtained ironically mirrors the violent entertainment and infotainment crime and justice portraits that historically dominated legacy media content (Surette, 2015b). As offenders appear to take instructions more than motivations from criminogenic media, property and non-violent copycat crime is likely more common than the violent predatory events collected herein (Surette, 2013b). Langman (2017), however, points out that many mass and school shooters take inspiration from prior crimes and criminals more than

techniques. This is evident in a number of the open access copycat crimes where the perpetrators specifically cited prior criminals as their heroic models. In sum the open access copycat crimes are unlikely to be representative of actual copycat crimes previously described as mostly non-violent juvenile events or adult property crimes by Surette and Chadee (2019) and Surette and Maze (2015). The revealed open access content herein was correct on males as the most common copycat offenders but not much else. The content was closer to entertainment portraits than official crime data or copycat crime research (Surette, 2015b).

How Does Open Access Information Match with Prior Copycat Crime Research?

The findings offer important information regarding how portrayals of copycat crime in open access digital media compare with prior copycat research in legacy media. One element where open access content match reality is the attribution of movies as the most common idea source for copycat crimes. Surette and Maze (2015) found that incarcerated inmates also credited movies as a copycat crime source more than other media similar to the millennial search teams. Additionally, the open access content broadly matched media content reported in a number of prior legacy media studies (Surette, 2015), such as media attention to crime and violence stories (Newman, 1998). The coders in this study found substantial content that glorified and legitimized violence. The open access material also portrayed many copycat crimes where perpetrators blurred fantasy and reality in portraits that looped content from older or fictional crimes. Other factors that were present and common in both legacy and open access copycat crime content include portraying violence as effective, crime as fun, and criminals as depraved.

Within the open access social construction of crime, social learning and priming came across as the most forwarded mechanisms. Social learning was somewhat reduced however as a favored mechanism as the offenders were not often portrayed as normal, thereby mitigating their impact as role models. In addition, most were killed or captured further limiting their effectiveness as social learning models. Counter balancing this limitation, priming through exposure to violent media images was also present and presented as playing a role in a number of the copycat offender who copied prior real-world crimes. Arousal and desensitization of consumers were also possible through intensified emotional reactions to highly violent crimes and through the dulling of sensitivity to violence.

Another finding of interest is the reduced role that celebrity played in these events. Although celebrity involvement has been linked to heightened media attention in the general coverage of crime (Penford-Mounce, 2009) and has been noted as a driver in copycat crime (Helfgott, 2015), the absence of celebrity focus in the open access content suggests that high-profile films were more important for copycat crime generation than high profile celebrity offenders or victims. Irrespective of the U.S. being a celebrity obsessed society (Harvey, 2002), celebrity obsession was not an open access factor regarding whether a copycat crime attracted attention. Most of the copycat preparators and victims were unknown prior to the crimes. Instead, media newsworthiness and unusual crime factors drove inclusion.

In terms of their social construction framing, copycat crime was often portrayed in the open access content within the media violence and social breakdown frames as described by Sasson (1995). The social breakdown frame depicts crime as a consequence of family and community disintegration due to social permissiveness, unemployment, and racial discrimination (Sasson, 1995). Regarding the embedded claims about crime, psychotic predator strangers committing violent crime were the main factual claims found. This predatory criminal narrative provides a culturally palatable explanation of these crimes and why people mimic them.

The implication for criminal justice policies from the open access content is an enhanced criminal justice system seen as necessary to address a unique crime threat. As the transition from legacy to digital social media continues, copycat crime is expected to increase as the expectation to actively participate on the part of media consumers takes a deeper hold on society, both for offenders who have easy access to crime models and for audiences who expect to be included in the investigations (Surette, 2017).

Limitations

The primary limitation to this research is its reliance on an opportunity non-random sample of open source content. Compiled data was sensitive to the skill of the student search teams. Additionally, as college students, these teams may not be representative of millennials. Furthermore, the data reflects the portrait of copycat crime available in open access sites, not copycat crime in reality. It therefore describes what society might believe about copycat crime but not the dynamics of copycat crime. Lastly, while participant characteristics such as gender and age was estimated, information on individual coders from the coders themselves was not collected and the collection unit of analysis was a “search team” making exploration for any relationships between searcher demographics, gender differences for example, and interpretations of the open access content not possible.

Concluding Comments

This research indicates that open access content about copycat crime largely replicates the portrait found in legacy entertainment and news media. As such, the impact of this content is likely to be through the impact of the technology on communications, not through new content. Two features of 21st Century media technology are thought to exacerbate a copycat effect independent of content. Crime has come to be seen as a form of art to be performed and an aestheticized hyper reality has been imposed on the public to attend to and sometimes participate in the performances (Black, 1991; Helfgott, 2015; Surette, 2015b). The result has not been new content but a different manner in how audiences interact with content and an associated exacerbation of the criminogenic impact of content.

In this study an enormous amount of information about copycat crime in open access sites was collected in a single sitting, some of it likely valid but much inaccurate when contrasted with prior copycat crime research. As a group, new media have ironically substantially increased access to large amounts of information and multiple worldviews while having possible conflicting effects on the diversity of the content accessed and the worldviews considered (Fletcher & Nielson, 2018). Given a larger media menu, contemporary media consumers have narrowed their diets (Tewksbury & Rittenberg, 2012). Therefore, the attributed influences are not necessarily the actual influences but reflect how the open source content portrayed the genesis of these events.

This study suggests that pre and post measures of estimates of copycat crime prevalence on open access consumers would be of interest as well as the comparison of such estimates with the real-world estimate of one in four offenders having attempted a copycat crime (Surette, 2014a). More detail on coder demographics and exploration of interaction effects is also needed. Along those lines, open source impact on public attitudes and an individual's relationship with media such as trust in media as a source of information and interpretation of crime and justice content would be of value. Research on open access as unique media and their influence on identification with perpetrators, consumer susceptibility to a mean-world view, and in turn, effects on their perceptions and behavior is additionally needed. Related to prior crimes and criminals as copycat inspirations,

cultural factors, including values placed on fame, notoriety, and crime and violence, and prevalence of media generated moral panics are unexplored research questions concerning open access media. Lastly, to what extent open source copycat crime content encourages second wave copycat crimes is unknown but there are an increasing number of documented cases suggesting that actual serial murderers and school shooters have mimicked and/or altered their behavior based on media stories of actual or fictional killers (Helfgott, 2015; Langman, 2017).

The relationship between millennials, open access data, and copycat crime is unique, likely powerful, and awaits additional research attention.

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ⁱ Copycat crime refers to imitative crime influenced by media (Helfgott, 2015, Surette, 2002, 2013a). To be a copycat, a crime must have been inspired by an earlier, publicized crime — there must be a pair of crimes linked through the media” (Surette, 2015a). The generating crimes can be portrayed in the news or fictionally represented (Helfgott, 2008).

ⁱⁱ The first open access social networking site, SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997 and easily accessible social media went mainstream in 2003 with MySpace which youth began joining in mass in 2004 (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Copycat Crime Research-a-thon” was the second event in a series of live data collection events. The first, a “Homicide Research-a-thon” was conducted in 2016 and developed by William Parkin and Jeff Gruenewald and featured live data collection on open source data on homicides, guest speakers from the Seattle Police Department, the King County Medical Examiner’s Office, Victim Support Services, and the King County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, and homicide-themed music, and raffle prizes for homicide-related trivia. The Copycat Research-a-thon was modeled after the first event with a focus on copycat crime.

^{iv} Biological (Genetics/Physiology/Neuroanatomy); Psychological (Personality/Mental Health/Clinical Disorder); Sociological (Environment/Family/upbringing/Demographics); Cultural/Subcultural (Cultural/subcultural forces such as stereotypes and values, cultural artifacts); Phenomenological (The unique meaning the crime holds for the perpetrator); Routine Activity/Ecological (Elements that increase temptation/decrease risk/provide opportunity for a crime to occur with a willing offender, suitable target, and presence/absence of audience).

Appendix B: Open Access Copycat Crime Events

Year	Media Source	Perpetrator(s)	Number Killed and Wounded	Location
1966	Richard Speck and Charles Whitman (r)	Robert Benjamin Smith	5	Mesa, AZ
1974	Magnum Force (f)	William Andrews and Pierre Shelby	5	Ogden, UT
1980	The Catcher in the Rye (f)	Mark David Chapman	1	Manhattan, NY
1980	The Hillside Strangler (r)	Veronica Lynn Compton	1	Bellingham, WA
1981	Taxi Driver (f)	John Hinckley	5	Washington, D.C.
1983	The Collector (f)	Leonard Lake	11	Calaveras County, CA
1984	The Collector (f)	Robert Berdella	6	Kansas City, MO
1985	Chicago Tylenol Murders (r)	Unknown	10	Tokyo, Japan
1986	Chicago Tylenol Murders (r)	Stella Nickell	2	Auburn, WA
1988	Rage (f)	Jeffrey Lyne Cox	60	San Gabriel, CA
1988	Friday the 13 th	Mark Branch	1	Greenfield, MA
1989	Rage (f)	Dustin Pierce	0	McKee, KY
1990	The Zodiac Killer (r)	Heriberto Seda	8	Brooklyn, NY
1991	Robocop 2 (f)	Nathaniel White	1	Middletown, NY
1991	The Fisher King	George Pierre Hennard	50	Killeen, TX
1993	Child's Play 3 (f)	Robert Thompson and Jon Venables	1	Liverpool, England
1994	Interview with a Vampire (f)	Daniel Sterling	1	San Francisco, CA
1995	Natural Born Killers (f)	Darran and Edmondson	2	MS and LA
1995	Money Train (f)	Thomas Malik, Vincent Ellerbe, and James Irons	1	Brooklyn, NY
1996	Child's Play 2 (f)	Martin Bryant	58	Tasmania, Australia
1996	Rage and Jeremy music video (f)	Barry Dale Loukaitis	4 123	Moses Lake, WA

1996	Set it Off (f)	Virginia Marie Kay	1	Aberdeen, WA
1997	Basketball Diaries (f)	Michael Carneal	8	West Paducah, KY
1997	Doom (f)	Evan Ramsey	4	Bethel, AK
1997	Heaven’s Gate mass suicide (f)	Wayne Cooke and Charlie Humphreys	2	Rancho Santa Fe, CA
1998	Scream (f)	Mario Padilla	1	Los Angeles, CA
1999	Natural Born Killers (f)	Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris	13	Columbine, CO
1999	Reservoir Dogs (f)	Mark McKeefrey, Allan Bentley, and Graham Neary	1	Litherland, England
1999	Centennial Olympic Park Bombing (r)	David Copeland	143	London, England
2001	Scream (f)	Thierry Jaradin	1	Gerpennes, Belgium
2002	The Matrix(f)	Tonda Lynn Ansley	1	Hamilton, OH
2002	Queen of the Damned (f)	Allan Menzies	1	Fauldhouse, Scotland
2002	Grand Theft Auto III (f)	An Oakland gang	13	Oakland, CA
2002	The Matrix (f)	John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo	27	Washington D.C., MD, and VA
2003	Grand Theft Auto: Vice City (f)	Devon Moore	5	Fayette, AL
2003	The Matrix (f)	Joshua Cooke	2	Fairfax, VA
2004	American Psycho, Silence of the Lambs (f)	Michael Hernandez	1	Miami, FL
2004	Friday the 13 th and The Nightmare on Elm Street (f)	Daniel Gonzalez	6	London and Sussex, England
2006	Jack the Ripper, as referenced in Killers: The Most Barbaric Murderers of Our Time (r)	Derek Brown	2	East London, England

2006	Scream (f)	Brian Draper and Torey Adamcik	1	Pocatello, ID
2006	Columbine High School Massacre (r)	Alvaro Castillo	3	Orange County, NC
2006	Natural Born Killers (f)	Jasmine Richardson and Jeremy Allan Steinke	3	Alberta, Canada
2007	Columbine School Shooting (r)	Cho Seung Hu	57	Blacksburg, VA
2007	Saw (f)	Two unnamed 13-year-olds	1	Algood, TN
2008	Dexter (f)	Mark Twitchell	2	Alberta, Canada
2008	Grand Theft Auto IV (f)	Brandon Cruz, Stephen Attard, and Samuel Philip, Dylan Laird, Jaspreet Singh, and Gurnoor Singh	3	Long Island, NY
2008	Wedding Crashers (f)	Olga Louniakova	1	Seymour, CT
2009	Saw (f)	John and Noor, surnames unknown	1	Salt Lake City, UT
2009	Fight Club (f)	Kyle Shaw	1	Manhattan, NY
2009	The Dark Knight Rises (f)	Christopher Lanum	1	Fort Eustis, VA
2010	Ivan Milat (r)	Matthew Milat	1	New South Wales, Australia
2010	The Lawnmower Man (r)	Bruce McArthur	8	Ontario and Toronto, Canada
2011	Coronation Street (f)	Daniel Bartlam	1	Nottingham, England
2011	Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 (f)	Anders Breivik	77	Oslo and Utoya, Norway
2011	The Town (f)	Navahcia Edwards	1	Palos Heights, IL
2011	Wedding Crashers (f)	Luciana Reichel	1	Madison, WI

2012	Columbine School Shooting (r)	Adam Lanza	26	Newtown, CT
2012	Ted Bundy (r)	Tyler Benson	1	Chattanooga, TN
2012	Saw VI (f)	Matthew Tingling	1	West London, England
2012	Anthony Sowell (r)	Michael Madison	3	Cuyahoga County, OH
2012	Project X (f)	Unknown	1	Houston, TX
2012	The Dark Knight Rises (f)	James Holmes	82	Aurora, CO
2013	Breaking Bad (f)	Jason Hart	1	Spokane, WA
2013	The Loved Ones (f)	Gary George	1	Chester, England
2013	Halloween (f)	Jake Evans	2	Parker County, TX
2013	Grand Theft Auto IV (f)	Zachary Burgess	10	Baton Rouge, LA
2013	Dexter (f)	Mark Howe	1	Leicester, England
2014	Slender Man (f)	Anissa Weier and Morgan Geysler	1	Waukesha, WI
2014	The “Yorkshire Ripper” Peter Sutcliffe (r)	David Parsons	1	North Yorkshire, England
2014	Dexter (f)	Steven Miles	1	Surrey, England
2014	Grand Theft Auto V (f)	Eldon Samuel III	2	Coeur d’Alene, ID
2014	Columbine School Shooting (r)	Aaron Ybarra	3	Seattle, WA
2014	First Blood (f)	James Bourque	5	Moncton, Canada
2015	Bride of Chucky (f)	Elena Lobacheva and an unspecified number of members of a Russian gang	14	Moscow, Russia
2016	The Purge (f)	Jonathan Cruz	3	Indianapolis, IN
2017	Oklahoma City Bombing (r)	Jerry Varnell	0	Oklahoma City, OK
2017	Manchester by the Sea (f)	Ernest Franklin II and Heather Franklin	1	Guilford, NY

2018	Columbine School Shooting (r)	Dimitrios Pagourtzis	23	Santa Fe, TX
2018	Las Vegas Shooting (r)	Nikolas Cruz	17	Parkland, FL

Note: under media source, (r) denotes a real crime as source, (f) denotes a fictional crime as source.