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Column: Innovation in Libraries

Using True Crime Stories to Demonstrate Medical Library Research

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ABSTRACT

The author wrote a series for the Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library's blog that explored the connections between true crime and medicine. Each of the ten entries in the "Disorder in the Court" series tells a true story of a crime or court case that involved a medical diagnosis. The entry then delves into the etiology and pathophysiology of the particular syndrome, using information from research articles and point-of-care databases available through the library. This blog series shows the potential of storytelling in demonstrating how to conduct library research.

KEYWORDS

True crime, medical research, blog posts, storytelling, outreach

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Note: This column mentions details of some criminal cases, including murder.

A true crime story, at first, does not seem like it belongs on the front page of an academic library website. But no, it had not been published by mistake: this was the first post of my “Disorder in the Court” blog series (Brill, 2022a). Each of the ten entries in this series tells a true story of a crime or court case that involved a medical diagnosis. Each entry then delves into the etiology and pathophysiology of the particular syndrome, using information from research articles and point-of-care databases available through the Himmelfarb Health Sciences Library.

Himmelfarb Library serves three schools at the George Washington University: the School of Medicine and Health Sciences; the School of Nursing; and the Milken Institute of Public Health. We publish new blog posts on our website a few times a week. These posts range from information content, such as highlighting a new library resource, to educational content, such as a biography of a fascinating character from medical history. I wanted to find a way to make our blog more popular and showcase the library’s resources at the same time. That is why I proposed “Disorder in the Court,” a blog series that would use true crime stories to demonstrate how to conduct medical research using library resources. I received enthusiastic approval from my supervisor and the library’s social media committee chair.

Academic librarians know that storytelling can be an effective way to teach students basic research skills and lessen library anxiety (Vossler & Watts, 2017). With even a brief literature search, you can find many examples of library activities that use storytelling to introduce students to the library space and promote resources (ex. Davis, 2019; Rajchel & Snyder, 2016). Moreover, true crime as a genre is more popular than ever, with podcasts like “My Favorite Murder” and television shows like “Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story” garnering millions of listeners and viewers (Hailu, 2022; Shapiro, 2020).

In fact, a number of the library activities I read about revolved around murder mysteries or other topics related to true crime. An orientation activity at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice library, for example, requires students to practice research skills to solve a mystery based on a real 1921 crime (Davis, 2019). At Haverford College Libraries, an exhibition about a 1699 unsolved murder used emerging digital humanities technology to allow students to engage with primary source materials and hone their critical literacy skills (Rajchel & Snyder, 2016). My project shares many aspects with these activities but seems to be a unique combination of true crime, medicine, and research skills, aimed at an audience of advanced health sciences students.

The Blog Posts

For the posts, I planned to discuss ten true crime stories that included a medical diagnosis in some capacity, whether affecting the victim or the perpetrator of the crime. I was already familiar with two or three cases that were appropriate for the series, but to reach my goal of ten posts, I needed to do more research. After some Googling and asking for ideas on a

few true crime subreddits on Reddit, I had a good number of stories to choose from, and I began writing. My blog posts, averaging around 570 words, were not meant as a thorough lesson on any research topic; rather, I hoped that they would inspire students to think critically about the importance and methods of library research.

One story I wrote about is the case of Aaron Hernandez, a professional football player who committed murder in 2013 (Brill, 2022b). Hernandez later died by suicide and was diagnosed with chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a neurodegenerative disorder that develops because of repeated trauma to the head. In the post, I cited DynaMed (a point-of-care medical resource) as well as several articles found via PubMed, including a review article and a cohort study. Because CTE can only be diagnosed post-mortem, I explained, a cohort study is much more feasible than a randomized controlled trial. I ended the post by posing an ethical conundrum: Could CTE be a viable defense for murder?

Another example is a bizarre story of a 1984 bioterrorist attack in which followers of the mystic Rajneesh contaminated salad bars at ten restaurants with *Salmonella*. As a result, 751 people suffered food poisoning (luckily, there were no fatalities). In this post, I focused on the diagnosis and treatment of *Salmonella* poisoning (Brill, 2022d). In doing so, I cited a review article found via PubMed, a clinical practice guideline from the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), and a publication from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). I demonstrated how these different document types provide different types of information, meant for different audiences. The IDSA guideline gave information for medical professionals on current best practices in treating *Salmonella* poisoning, for example, while the government publication gave consumer-level information on the bacteria.

From the start, I knew I had to treat this topic carefully. I wanted to make sure I was focusing not on the most lurid or gruesome aspects of the case, but on how medical research can play an important role in these events. I also had to remember that I was discussing the stories of real people who suffered, and who should therefore be treated with great respect. Furthermore, I had to consider that the audience for these stories might vary widely in terms of the content they would be comfortable consuming; to that end, I made sure to provide content warnings for these blog posts, such as discussion of murder, child abuse, and eating disorders.

Another issue arose that had not even crossed my mind. In one post, discussing the story of Vince Gilmer, a man who committed murder and was later diagnosed with Huntington's disease, I used a stock image of a Black man in jail (Brill, 2022c). My supervisor, who approves all blog posts before they are published online, asked me to change the image because Mr. Gilmer was not a Black man, and my use of that image could be perceived as perpetuating stereotypes of Black men as violent criminals. I was grateful for her intervention and, moving forward, more mindful of the potential cultural implications of true crime stories.

Conclusion

This blog series shows the potential of storytelling in demonstrating how to conduct health sciences research. In addition to posting the “Disorder in the Court” stories on our blog on our website, we disseminated links to the posts via our social media channels (Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram). However, these blog posts did not meaningfully increase engagement with our social media. Although these stories, when told with care and respect, pose interesting questions, and can help demonstrate medical research skills, perhaps blog posts were not the most effective way to present them. These stories could have a greater impact on the intended audience as part of orientation sessions or elective library classes.

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