

Hijacking Banksy: using a contemporary art mystery to increase academic readership

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Abstract

In this article I examine the methodological and ethical rigor of a geographic profiling study and resulting article, published in 2016 in *Journal of Spatial Science*, which identifies by name a candidate for being the artist known as Banksy. I demonstrate that the article is characterized by a number of methodological flaws which fundamentally undermine the researchers' basis for determining Banksy's identity. On this background I argue that the researchers' decision to include a specific name in the article is ethically problematic and I suggest that the main purpose for the inclusion has likely been to attract attention to the study. I further propose that the sensationalist approach to increasing academic readership exemplified by the inclusion of a specific name in the article without solid empirical evidence to back it up may adversely affect researchers who continue to work within the field of street art studies.

Introduction

On 3 March 2016, an article entitled "Tagging Banksy: using geographic profiling to investigate a modern art mystery" by Michelle V. Hauge, Mark D. Stevenson, D. Kim Rossmo and Steven C. Le Comber was published online by *Journal of Spatial Science*.¹ Coming from the fields of art history and sociology, in my own research I have been quite far removed from methods like geographic profiling and I was therefore interested in what this method might be able to contribute to the study of street art. In the remainder of the present text I will discuss the reception and contents of the article. In doing so, I will raise a number of methodological and ethical issues, and I will discuss the potential implications of the latter for the field of street art studies.

The benefits of naming names

For what is essentially a short and relatively technical methodological text, the article received a lot of attention when it was published. At the end of 4 March 2016 it had been viewed 862 times, and on 7 March it became the most viewed article on the *Journal of Spatial Science* website with 1524 views. As illustrated by the blue curve in Figure 1, the initial explosive rise in article views continued until 9 March (1757 views), after which the growth rate slowed down.

A major contributing factor to the unusually high interest in the article during the first days after its publication was likely the researchers' decision to include in the text the name of a person who they presented as the main candidate for being the artist known as Banksy. There has been a lot of conjecture regarding the identity of the artist ever since Banksy rose to fame around the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, and the name mentioned in the article has previously been

1 - The publication was first listed on the journal's website as a "Review Article". Its designation has since been changed to "Research Paper". In the present text, I will refer to the publication as an "article" since this was how it was first presented.

brought forward by the English tabloid press (Joseph, 2008). Judging by the headlines of news stories in connection with the publication in *Journal of Spatial Science*, the inclusion of a specific name in an academic article may have given some the impression that the researchers had produced scientific evidence that substantiates previous speculation (see e.g. Burke 2016; Sherwin, 2016; Yong 2016). Reports that Banksy's legal representatives delayed the publication of the academic article due to "concerns about how the study was to be promoted" (Webb, 2016) may have reinforced this impression and increased public interest in the study.

The attention afforded the academic article in the news media and subsequently on social media is indicated by its Altmetric score – a numeric representation of mentions in different media which "is intended to provide an indicator of the attention surrounding a research output" (Davies, 2015). As can be seen from the red curve in Figure 1, the article's Altmetric score rose significantly in the days following its publication. While I did not collect Altmetric scores for the period 3-5 March 2016, on 6 March the article had reached a score of 713,² and it continued to increase rapidly until 8 March (when it reached 808).³ Since then it has gradually risen to 870 (on 11 May 2016).⁴ For context, this score places the article in the all-time top 5% of research outputs tracked by Altmetric.⁵ Although it is a well-known fact that correlation does not imply causation, the similarity of the trajectories of the Article views and Altmetric score curves in Figure 1 is

2 - This number was calculated on the basis of mentions of the article by the following: 50 news outlets, 3 blogs, 398 tweeters, 2 Facebook pages, 1 Wikipedia page, 4 Google+ users. Included in the calculation were also 4 readers on Mendeley.

3 - This number was calculated on the basis of mentions of the article by the following: 57 news outlets, 4 blogs, 481 tweeters, 2 Facebook pages, 1 Wikipedia page, 4 Google+ users. Included in the calculation were also 4 readers on Mendeley and 1 reader on CiteULike.

4 - This number was calculated on the basis of mentions of the article by the following: 62 news outlets, 4 blogs, 514 tweeters, 4 Facebook pages, 5 Google+ users. Included in the calculation were also 25 readers on Mendeley and 1 reader on CiteULike.

5 - To further contextualize the article's Altmetric score, it can be noted that as of 11 May 2016 the average score of the other 19 of the top 20 most read articles from *Journal of Spatial Science* was 0,11 (this number was calculated on the basis of two articles on the list that each have an Altmetric score of 1).

remarkable, and it is probable that the unusual amount of attention the article received upon publication has affected its readership in a positive manner.

While the researchers have been exceptionally successful in terms of garnering attention for their study from news outlets and on social media, it is important to bear in mind that a high Altmetric score neither says anything about whether the attention was of a positive or negative nature, nor about the quality of the research itself. Indeed, as mentioned previously, I find that the article is characterized by a number of issues of both a methodological and ethical nature. I will now present my main points of critique and then go on to discuss some of the possible implications of the publication of the article for researchers in the field of street art studies.

Methodological issues

From the way the geographic profiling study is presented in the article, there seems to be a number of flaws in the applied method upon which the researchers' conclusion about Banksy's identity is made. I will address four main methodological issues here, which in turn influence the ethics of naming in the article a specific individual as a prime candidate for being Banksy.

First, as geographic profiling analyst Spencer Chainey has also pointed out in a comment in an article published on the *BBC* website, the researchers have failed to take into account the temporal dimension of the creation of the artworks. Chainey is quoted in the article as saying that this is a sign that "there's more [the researchers] could have done to fine tune the analysis" (Webb, 2016). I find this assessment of the issue generous. Rather than being a matter of fine tuning, it appears to me that taking into account when individual artworks were created is fundamental for ensuring the functionality of the geographic profiling method the researchers have applied. The method rests upon the notion that "95 percent of [Banksy's] artworks [...] lie within approximately two kilometers of a source (e.g., a home)" (Hauge et al., 2016: 187). In other words, the researchers make the assumption that Banksy will typically not travel further than around 2 kilometers from a base of operations to put up an artwork. The basic idea, then, is that it is possible to create a geographic profile by running the placement of clusters of artworks against "sources", that is to say known addresses associated with the candidate

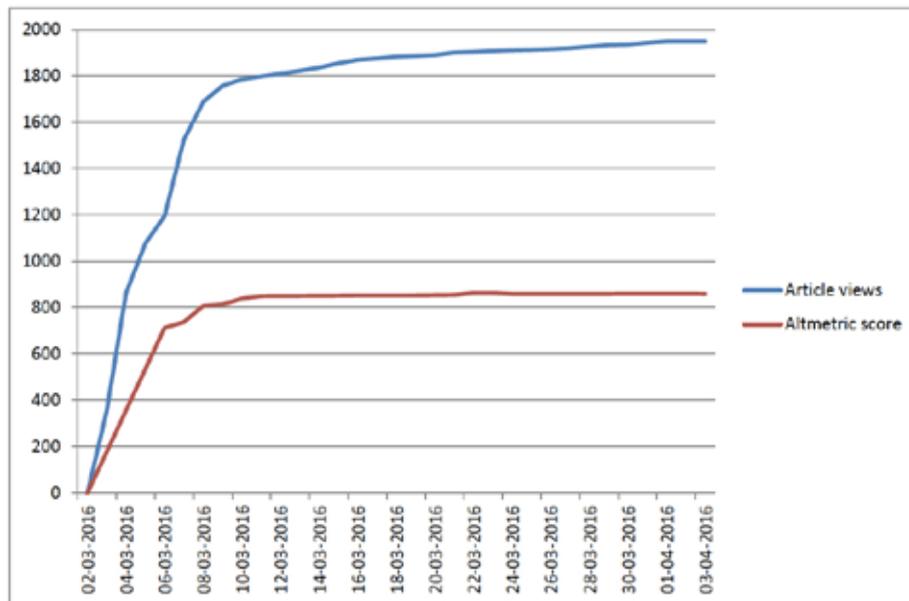


Fig. 1 - Overview of the article's views and Altmetric score during the first month after publication.

for being Banksy. However, while the researchers may be able to demonstrate a cluster of artworks in an area where their candidate for being Banksy *at some point in time* had a “source”, when ignoring the temporal aspect they have no way of ascertaining whether a specific “source” was actually in use when the artworks were created. To put it differently, without taking into account the timeline of the artworks' creation, the researchers are unable to convincingly establish a link between “sources” and artworks.

Second, the idea that artworks will typically go up within a distance of 2 kilometers from a “source” is based on a specific analytical component, called a sigma value, which the researchers describe as “a typical value for ‘criminal’ movement in urban environments” (Hauge et al., 2016: 187). The use of this particular sigma value indicates that the researchers – for analytical, not necessarily moral, purposes – designate Banksy's activities as “criminal”. However, towards the end of the article they seem to contradict this categorization by stating that “[w]hile some see Banksy's street art as illegal graffiti, there is often an element of political protest in his subversive epigrams. His spatial patterns are therefore similar to those of others who post political messages in public places” (Hauge et al., 2016: 189). The notion that Banksy's spatial patterns are similar to those of others who post messages of political protest in

public places could potentially mean that the sigma value used to determine the expected distance from an artwork to a “source” would be affected, unless the sigma values for “criminal activity” and “political protest activity” happen to be the same. That the researchers appear to be conflicted about the proper analytical categorization of Banksy's activities, along with the fact that they neglect to discuss the potential implications of this issue, further calls into question the scientific rigor of the study.

Third, the researchers' focus on just one candidate for being Banksy is problematic. While the individual mentioned in the article may fit the geographic profile, there could be other candidates who fit just as well or even better, but who are not considered because they have not previously been in the media spotlight. Focusing on one specific candidate without any control cases to compare with comes across as biased and methodologically unsound. Rather than appease, the problem of naming a specific name is underscored by the researchers' own acknowledgement in the article that without “other serious ‘suspects’ to investigate, it is difficult to make conclusive statements about Banksy's identity based on the analysis presented here” (Hauge et al., 2016: 188f).

As a fourth and final point of critique, it is a problem that the researchers take for granted that all the artworks they have



Fig. 2: Excerpt from a discussion on Twitter about the ethics of publishing the personal information of the researchers' main candidate for being the artist known as Banksy.

included in their study were in fact created by a single person known as Banksy. To confirm authorship the researchers use the artist's website as well as two books by Martin Bull that detail locations of artworks attributed to Banksy (2010; 2013). Although the website and books are great resources in some respects, they do not provide information as to whether or not all the artworks included are by the hand of the person known as Banksy. Many contemporary artists work with assistants, and it cannot be ruled out that others have assisted by independently creating some of the stencil paintings in the street on behalf of the artist. This is a possibility that has also been alluded to in a humorous account by American artist David Choe (2016). It would seem that the researchers have not considered the possibility that more than one person may have been involved in creating the large body of work attributed to the artist. This is an unfortunate oversight with serious implications for the study. If several individuals have been involved in creating the artworks, the latter may have multiple "sources", not all of which will necessarily be linked directly to the individual known as Banksy. The uncertainty as to who has painted a given artwork undermines the idea of linking artworks to a specific "source" and thus compromises in a fundamental way the researchers' basis for determining Banksy's identity through geographic profiling.

Ethical implications of the study's methodological issues

On the basis of the above points of critique related to the methodological aspects of the article and the study upon which it is based, I will now go on to discuss the ethics of making public the name of the researchers' candidate for being the artist known as Banksy. From the article itself, it is clear that the researchers recognize the potential ethical issues with their study, as they address this explicitly in the last paragraph of the text. Here they write: "Ethical note: the authors are aware of, and respectful of, the privacy of [name redacted] and his relatives and have thus only used data in the public domain. We have deliberately omitted precise addresses" (Hauge et al., 2016: 189). Given that the researchers, as described in the previous section, have included personal information about a named individual despite openly acknowledging they have no proof the named person is Banksy, this statement comes across as disingenuous and/or ethically uninformed. In addition, as Kate Crawford, a Principal Researcher at Microsoft Research New York City, has pointed out on Twitter (see Figure 2), using only publicly available data may still constitute doxxing. It is therefore not a safeguard against unethical research practice (see also Dvorsky, 2016).

As can also be seen in Figure 2, Crawford's critique on Twitter was met with a response from co-author of the article Mark D. Stevenson, who pointed out that the researchers had received "approval from an independent ethics board". Note that it is not clear from Stevenson's reply exactly what the ethics committee ostensibly approved. This is significant because, in order for its work to make sense, an ethics committee will usually assess a research project *before* it takes place. This makes it likely that the ethics committee approval cited by Stevenson would have been for the initially proposed research project, rather than the specific decision to include in the published article the name of the researchers' prime candidate for being Banksy. When considering this, one should bear in mind that according to another co-author, Steven C. Le Comber, the researchers initially planned to "pull out the 10 most likely suspects [for being Banksy], evaluate all of them and not name any... But it rapidly became apparent that there is only one serious suspect, and everyone knows who it is" (Webb, 2016). If this is correct, it is clear that the original intent – to include multiple cases and preserve the anonymity of the people being used as case studies – was very different from the way the research project was actually carried out and presented to the public.

Echoing Stevenson's claim about approval from an independent ethics committee, in an email response on 6 March 2016 to a query by me regarding the article's potential ethical issues, the editor of *Journal of Spatial Science*, Graeme Wright, explained that the matter had been reviewed by the Ethics Committee of Queen Mary University of London. However, the claims made by Stevenson and Wright regarding the involvement of the ethics committee were later contradicted by the Chair of that committee, Elizabeth Hall. On 31 March 2016, Hall informed me via email that the research project was never formally considered and approved because "analysis work with publicly available data is not normally subject to research ethics review" and the "research [the committee views] is human participant related only". Hall added that Le Comber did approach her and a senior committee member to confirm that no formal ethical review would be necessary and to seek informal advice regarding the project. It would seem, then, that Stevenson and Wright in their responses to critics, whether deliberately or due to a misunderstanding, misrepresented

the involvement of the ethics committee. It should also be noted that even if their accounts had been accurate and the ethics committee actually had approved the initial research project, rather than simply deeming that it fell outside its jurisdiction, this would of course not absolve the authors and the journal editor from their responsibility of assessing from an ethical perspective the contents of the article before publishing it.

As mentioned above, according to Le Comber it became clear to the researchers early on that they had only one real candidate for being Banksy. On Twitter Le Comber has further stated that making public the name of this person is not an ethical problem since it has previously been brought forward by a national English tabloid newspaper and has subsequently been repeated on thousands of websites. This line of reasoning is clearly flawed. There is, or at least there should be, a significant difference between the expectations for the quality of the content of tabloid press stories and academic articles. While it is well-known that the former are often at least partly based on conjecture for sensationalist and entertainment purposes, and in their digital format serve as clickbait to generate advertising revenue, there is a tacit expectation that the content of the latter is based on facts derived from solid research. The name's inclusion in an academic article, then, cannot simply be compared to being mentioned in a tabloid news story, on social media or random websites, since the genre of the academic article tends to be viewed as much more credible.

I would suggest that, from an ethical point of view, the researchers should have stuck to their original idea of including multiple cases in their study and preserving the anonymity of their candidates for being Banksy. Some of the researchers have expressed positive surprise in the media at the attention the article has received (Rosenberg, 2016). However, given that in terms of the methodological development of geographic profiling – which is clearly meant to be the focus of the article – nothing is gained by naming a specific individual as the candidate for being Banksy, it seems likely that the researchers chose to diverge from the original idea of an anonymous study because they were aware of the media response their work could potentially draw if they included a name. While, as demonstrated in section 2, this worked very well for them, the attention may have come at a cost.

Epilogue: the price of naming names

The social environment surrounding the creation and consumption of street art – an environment I have elsewhere named “the street art world” (Bengtson, 2014) – is not always easy for researchers to navigate. One reason is that there exists within the street art world a rather strong anti-intellectual discourse and skepticism towards researchers and their agendas. A significant challenge is the perception among members of the street art world that researchers are outsiders whose primary goal is to further their own academic careers and who therefore cannot necessarily be trusted to respect the unspoken social rules of the environment within which they wish to conduct their study. Given that the street art world is an environment in which people engage in unsanctioned – and sometimes illegal – activities, it is not difficult to see why concerns about unwanted exposure flourish.

Many street art scholars depend on members of the street art world to be able to carry out their research. For example, researchers who use an ethnographic approach rely heavily on close interaction and rapport with agents from the social environment being studied. In spite of the difficulties they sometimes face, through hard work some researchers have managed over the years to earn the trust and acceptance of members of the street art world. As a result a lot of interesting research has been conducted and published within the relatively new field of street art studies. In my experience, the publication of research that explores in a respectful way the street art world has in turn led to that world’s members gradually becoming more positive towards researchers. This is a development which should of course be seen in the context of a more general ongoing process in which street art is being integrated in the established art world, but it is certainly also the result of researchers putting a lot of time and effort into nurturing relations within the street art world and actively working to overcome the “culture vulture” stigma previously carried by academics in that environment.

I do understand that the researchers behind the article in *Journal of Spatial Science* have worked with methods different to those applied in ethnography. Indeed, as mentioned in the beginning of this text, the use of geographic profiling was one of the main reasons I became interested in their study to begin with. However, regardless of our disciplinary

affiliations and the methods we apply, as researchers we all have an ethical responsibility to refrain from unnecessarily revealing sensitive information about the people we study. Not just because of the problems we might cause for those exposed, but also because of the obstacles we risk creating for researchers who come into the field after us.

Of course there can be situations where it is legitimate to reveal findings that members of the street art world would prefer had remained undisclosed. However, as mentioned above, this is not the case with the study published in *Journal of Spatial Science* since omitting the name of the researchers’ candidate for being Banksy from the article would not have detracted from the methodological points the researchers wanted to make. The inclusion of the name therefore seems to serve no other purpose than to attract media attention.

It remains to be seen what the consequences of this sensationalist direction of academic publishing will be for scholars who, unlike the authors of the article in *Journal of Spatial Science*, have more than a fleeting interest in street art as a field of research. I do fear, however, that the publication and wide broadcasting of the study will damage the standing of researchers within the street art world and make it more difficult to convince its members that their information will be kept confidential, thereby to some degree undermining the hard work street art scholars have done over the past 15 years.

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