

“The Blue Light Project”

“Crime is bad for marketing.” That was the main takeaway from my interview with Frank LoMonte, executive director of the Student Press Law Center (a legal assistance organization geared toward high school and college journalists). I spoke with LoMonte after I expanded the original scope of my final project. At first, I simply wanted to take a look at the blue emergency phones placed across Loyola University Chicago’s Lake Shore Campus. How many do we have? How often are they used? How often are they used *effectively*? I was inspired to look into this topic by my time at the University of Missouri – Columbia, when I oversaw a similar story while at the campus newspaper. With the cooperation of the MU Police Department, we gathered five years’ worth of data for the campus’ 214 blue emergency phones. We framed the story around the recent news that a California community college system was removing all their blue emergency phones due to the ubiquitous nature of cell phones on campus. Unfortunately, my source at LUC was not as cooperative as the MU source. Thus, my project transformed to its current state: a look at crime on campus (using publicly available data), how LUC deals with these instances and how the community responds.

While topics such as Internet privacy or health care have grown in popularity in recent years, crime has been a mainstay. According to a 2014 American Press Institute study, crime and public safety stories are why 40 percent of people turn to their local television news programs. The closest competitors in the local TV news market are

traffic and weather stories, coming in at 32 percent.¹ In general, it's a safe assumption to say that people are interested in crime reporting. But does that mean "The Blue Light Project" is a worthwhile endeavor? Chicagoans have many outlets to discover the nature of crime in their city. Myself, I found the Chicago Tribune's "Crime in Chicagoland"² website very helpful in compiling my research. Residents of Rogers Park even have sources dedicated specifically to their neighborhood. But what about the—at minimum—2,292 residents³ of LUC's Lake Shore Campus? What dedicated resources do they have to learn about the crimes occurring where they live, work and learn?

When editing the blue emergency phone article for The Maneater student newspaper, I knew I had to present something more than just the five years' worth of data. We had a staff graphic designer transform those numbers into something more interesting and visual, but I knew there needed to be more justification. Why should MUPD give us the time for an interview? Why should the executive editors give this article space in the newspaper? Why should a student take the time to look at this information? So I framed the story around a news hook—that of the California community college and their uninstallation of blue emergency phones. This time around, I realized I had the same issue. Interactive maps and graphics can only go so far in capturing and holding a reader's attention. Once again, I framed my information around a story. This time, I compiled a long-form article, using relevant quotes to introduce my data. I interviewed people who really had something to say, the president of LUC's Panhellenic Council, a news editor at The Phoenix, a representative of the company that provides LUC's blue emergency phones, etc. It didn't have a timely news hook, but that wasn't something I was overly concerned about. Unfortunately, that non-issue

resolved itself when a member of the LUC community was shot and killed right by campus during the last week of classes.

Again citing a 2014 American Press Institute study, the general American will use their laptop or computer to get their news, ahead of radio, newspapers and magazines. Further, of those with smartphones, 78 percent used their device in the past week to access the news. For tablet owners, that number was 73 percent⁴. Due to time constraints, “The Blue Light Project” was built with a “desktop first” way of thinking, but it is mostly functional on mobile devices. Although I’m sure my data would look nice as a center spread in a newspaper or magazine, the ubiquitous nature of the Internet is why it’s my preferred choice.

The Clery Act requires most all public and private U.S. universities and colleges to keep a public crime log. Specifically, “The log should be accessible to the public during normal business hours; remain open for 60 days and, subsequently, made available within two business days upon request.”⁵ LUC’s crime log is available online, within three clicks on their homepage. But it’s only three clicks if the user knows where to look. The crime log can be found under the “Crime Prevention” tab of Campus Safety’s website, alongside safety videos and courses. It’s not found under, “Programs & Resources.” What a user *can* find under the “Programs & Resources” tab is LUC’s 2013 Clery report—a PDF detailing crime reports from the past three years. But when compiling my Clery report graph for “The Blue Light Project,” I didn’t just want three years’ worth of data, I wanted 10 years. I ran into some trouble when trying to find those reports, as they weren’t linked anywhere on Campus Safety’s web page. It turned out, however, that while these reports aren’t publicly linked on any LUC webpage, they’re

still “out there.” An advanced Google search (limited to PDFs, with the word “Clery” hosted on LUC.edu) turned up the needed documents.

What’s the point I’m getting at? I’ll reiterate a quote from LoMonte, taken from my project, “There’s no question. In a lot of instances, schools have the ability to say more than the bare legal minimum, but they won’t. They consider crime bad for marketing.” Crime is bad for LUC’s marketing department, and it’s hypothetically why they’re putting out the bare minimum, as required by law. On Dec. 5, a student was shot and killed near campus, and it’s listed as an armed robbery in the crime log. That incident is listed alongside other lackluster crime descriptions such as “Vehicle” and locations only as detailed as “Lake Shore Campus.”⁶ I can’t do much about the lack of clarity, but it just goes to show how much a university can blur the lines when it comes to crime reporting. “The Blue Light Project” *can* act as a general resource—one place to compile a backlog of crime data from various sources that otherwise might get lost in the Internet wasteland.

- “The Blue Light Project” is hosted on Wordpress.org. After the initial hump of installing Wordpress, there was not much issue, as it’s very similar to Wordpress.com. I used a publicly available theme, chosen for its capabilities with parallax scrolling and video backgrounds.
- The timelapse video at the top of the page was taken with a GoPro Hero4 Silver, from atop LUC’s main parking structure. I used the GoPro software to compile and edit the resulting video without much issue.
- I took the background photos with my iPhone and a GoPro camera. Creating the featured color effect with the blue emergency phones was simple enough using my

existing knowledge of Photoshop. I created a copy of the photo, desaturated the original, cut out the phone from the color copy and pasted into the desaturated photo.

- I used Tableau Professional to create my charts. It's a steep learning curve, but they provide ample documentation for beginning users. The hardest part was correctly formatting the data in Excel.⁷
- For the crime map, I formatted the data in an Excel document, uploaded it into BatchGeo and then downloaded the resulting KML file. I then uploaded the KML file into Google Maps, which plotted every crime occurrence in the fall semester. I then created 16 distinct map markers in Photoshop, as Google Maps limits color coded markers to a basic color pallet.