<u>Local Crime News Coverage in Singapore: A Study of Broadsheets and a Tabloid</u>

1. Introduction

News media has the immense power to shape our sense of social reality; its selection and framing of events and topics sets the agenda for thought and social discourse. The agenda-setting function of news is often associated with politics coverage, such as the way in which political parties and candidates attempt to control what is presented in the news. Yet the coverage of local crime is also another significant area in this regard, for while it impacts the public's sense of safety and social conditions, it is also a commercially lucrative tool that can be utilised to draw readers. Given crime news's importance as well as potential for manipulation, I will be analysing the news coverage of local crime in Singapore, my home country. Specifically, I seek to compare the amount of coverage given to different categories of crime (as defined by the Singapore Police Force) with their actual frequency of occurring as documented in the 2014 annual police statistics. First, I hypothesise that the broadsheets, being more devoted to substantive news coverage that provides citizens with public affairs knowledge, would have less local crime news so as to focus more on hard news, whereas tabloids would have more soft news as this is how they attract readers. Second, I further hypothesise that the broadsheets, as reputable and reliable papers, would have crime coverage for the categories that more closely tallies with the true statistics; on the other hand, tabloids would have a sensationalistic bent and cover more crimes that are violent in nature or otherwise incite strong emotions.

2. Outline of Research Design

In this investigation, I recorded all news articles pertaining to crime and legal enforcement published from 2 to 6 March 2015, in three Singaporean newspapers: *The Straits Times, Today*, and *The New Paper*. *The Straits Times* (ST) is a broadsheet and "the most widely read newspaper in Singapore"; it is sold at newsstands and via subscription[1]. *Today* is a broadsheet and "Singapore's second most-read newspaper"[2]; it is distributed for free in public spaces. In contrast to the two broadsheets, *The New Paper* (TNP) is a tabloid that features both local and international soft news, and is sold at newsstands or by subscription.

At the same time, I obtained the 2014 annual crime statistics published by the Singapore Police Force, which show the crime frequencies based on category. The categories, along with the police force's explanation of these categories, are shown below[34]:

Type of Crime	Explanation
Theft (T)	- Includes "shop theft, theft occurring at residences, commercial and hotel premises, and theft at public areas."
Commercial Crimes (CC)	- "Crimes affecting businesses"[5] - "Comprising mainly cheating and related offences"
Crimes Against Person (CAP)	- "Crimes where the victim is an individual and suffers bodily harm as a result of the crime… includes offences such as murder, rioting, rape and outrage of modesty."
Violent/Serious Property Crimes (VS)	- "Crimes which involve the taking of money or property by force or threat of force against the victim"

[1] http://www.sph.com.sg/our-businesses/newspapers/th-straits-times-the-sunday-times/
[2] http://www.mediacorp.sg/en/corporate/print#980816
[3] http://www.police.gov.sg/stats/crimebrief2015.html
[4] http://www.police.gov.sg/stats/crimebrief2007.html
[5] http://www.acfe.com/uploadedfiles/acfe_website/content/asiapac/presentations/aedit-abdullah.pdf

Housebreaking and Related Crimes (H)	
Miscellaneous Crimes (MC)	- Other crimes that were not included above; "comprises various offences such as vandalism, trespassing and disorderly behavior"

I then coded the 59 news articles under the same categories as determined by the police, and calculated the percentage of news coverage devoted to each category over the five days. Analysis was then conducted by comparing the percentage of news coverage with the actual rate of crime occurrence, to study the different choices made by the newspapers and make inferences.

3. Measurement

For the study, I coded whole news articles based on the crime categories (T, CC, CAP, VS, H, MC) that the event described pertained to. While the categories were wholly based on the police force's definition, I made some modifications to this classification system. First, because the 'Miscellaneous Crimes' (MC) police statistic was not broken down by the specific offenses, I was unable to more specifically analyse the news coverage-occurrence rate relationship. Thus, the main part of my analysis focuses more on the other five identified crimes, while MC news articles will be addressed in a separate section. Second, some articles were more about general law enforcement system initiatives than a specific crime event; thus, the category 'Non-Crime' (NC) was also created.

To check for objective coding, I asked one other person to also code the articles; she was provided with the same category definitions as described above, and not told about the report focus or hypothesis. Comparing the two codings, the results had an inter-coder reliability of 98.3%, with discrepancies only on one article. The article in question was entitled 'Singaporean

duo fined for breaking UN rules', was coded under 'commercial crime' by the external coder, and under 'miscellaneous crime' by me. The news story was about how two Singaporean men were fined for paying the credit card and golf bills of an Indonesian businessman, who is on the UN list of prohibited persons and has been blacklisted for giving resources to ex-Liberian president Charles Taylor[6]. The discrepancy likely occurred due to confusion because the crime involved financial transactions and a businessman; however, as the crime does not affect businesses and as the businessman had been blacklisted for political reasons and not others, I decided to still code it as 'miscellaneous crime.'

4. Results

i) Police Crime Rate Statistics

Based on the most recent 2014 annual crime report from the Singapore Police Force, the most frequently occurring crime is theft, which represents over 50% of total crime. The remaining crimes represent much smaller proportions of total crime; the second most frequent offense would be commercial crimes, followed in descending order by miscellaneous crimes, crimes against persons, violent/serious property crimes, and then housebreaking. As miscellaneous crimes are not sorted by the specific offenses involved, like other categories, they will be discussed later. The specific numerical figures are presented in Table 1 below.

Type of Crime	Frequency (percentage out of 32196 total crimes)
Theft (T)	16784 / 32196 = **52.1%**
Commercial Crimes (CC)	5615 / 32196 = **17.4%**
Crimes Against Person (CAP)	4237 / 32196 = **13.2%**

[6] http://www.straitstimes.com/archive/thursday/news/singapore/courts-crime/story/singaporean-duo-fined-breaking-un-rules-20150305

Violent/Serious Property Crimes (VS)	538 / 32196 = **1.7%**
Housebreaking and Related Crimes (H)	350 / 32196 = **1.1%**
Miscellaneous Crimes (MC)	4672 / 32196 = **14.5%**

Table 1: 2014 annual crime frequencies by category

ii) Overall News Coverage by Crime Category

From the coding results, it can be seen that overall, crimes against persons and commercial crimes are most commonly reported on, alongside miscellaneous crimes. Meanwhile, thefts, violent/serious property crimes, housebreakings and non-crime events are hardly covered during this period. This is seen in Table 2 below.

Source	Number of Articles/Category							Total
	1 = CAP	**2 = CC**	**3 = T**	**4 = VS**	**5 = H**	**6 = NC**	**7 = MC**	
ST	9	6	1	1	0	2	11	**30**
Today	2	3	0	0	0	2	9	**16**
TNP	7	1	0	0	1	0	4	**13**
Total	**18**	**10**	**1**	**1**	**1**	**4**	**24**	**59**
Percentage (out of 59 total articles)	18/59 = **30.5%**	10/59 = **16.9%**	1/59 = **1.7%**	1/59 = **1.7%**	1/59 = **1.7%**	4/59 = **6.8%**	24/59 = **40.7%**	

Table 2: Coding Results of Article Crime Categories

The results counter the initial hypotheses in several ways. First, while one would expect the broadsheets to cover less local crime news (soft news) than the tabloid, it can be seen that ST's crime news coverage matches that in TNP – in fact, it is more than double that of the tabloid in total. Second, while one would expect broadsheet news coverage to more accurately reflect the true crime statistic, ST and TNP share a similar slant in coverage that favours crimes

against persons and commercial crimes over theft, which is actually the most prevalent. The fundamental preference for reporting on these two crimes over theft could perhaps be attributed to the fact that theft is not as 'exciting' or sensationalistic as crimes against persons (which involve physical violence and more immediately elicit feelings of sympathy) and commercial crimes (which involve deception and even institutional abuses of power, and thus incite feelings of moral outrage). As for violent/serious property crimes and housebreaking, the low numbers in both police statistics and article count might suggest that there are simply very few such cases present to report to begin with, such that the influence of sensationalism does not apply. Additionally, where one would expect the two major broadsheets to be rather similar, Today's amount of local crime news coverage is very small overall compared to that in ST.

These results can perhaps be attributed to the different papers' business models and aims. Arguably, ST, as the national paper that needs to maintain its profits and readership, may face a need to attract as many readers as possible – whether they are hard news junkies, soft news fans, or median consumers. Thus, where I had hypothesised that it would focus on hard news to provide substantive content, in reality it probably has adopted a more moderate approach that appeals to not just hard news junkies. Local crime news would allow ST to draw in many Singaporean readers as it is physically near and personally relevant to them, thus attracting them to buy or subscribe to the paper using more accessible and diverse types of content. Overall, this would explain why ST's amount of local crime news coverage is more similar to that of TNP than we would expect, even though one is a broadsheet and the other is a tabloid.

Yet if local crime news helps broadsheets attract more readers, why are there such differences between ST and Today? This can perhaps be explained by the differences in their business models. While ST is sold as papers or subscriptions, Today is given out for free in

public spaces. This suggests that Today does not rely on sales or subscriptions for profit; rather, it could be not-for-profit or using another strategy, such as making use of free distribution to achieve high circulation and thus attract advertising income. Further, as the Today paper is heavily distributed at public transport stations during the morning rush hour, a significant proportion of its audience would usually be office or white-collar workers who read it on the way to work to get updated on current affairs. This would suggest that the Today paper, by some virtue of its non-reliance on sales, is able to focus more on hard news, and has less need to publish soft news in order to drive up sales.

iii) Miscellaneous Crimes

The articles coded as miscellaneous crimes covered a diverse range of offenses, including vandalism, sexual offenses and political dissidence. Of the 24 articles, the most significant result was that one-third of them pertained to vandalism, indicating a certain level of importance given to the subject. Historically, vandalism has always been a condemned crime in Singapore that, like sexual abuse, rape, kidnapping and illegal overstaying, is punishable by caning. The emphasis on vandalism offenses in the news articles could thus reflect a government drive to thoroughly deter such acts and label them as crimes. In addition, while vandalism may not have the sensational violence or moral outrage of crimes against persons and commercial crimes, it has strong negative associations that could attract readers' interest, in the same ways as discussed above.

5. Discussion

From observing the amount of news coverage given to various categories of crime in different newspapers, and comparing the amount of coverage to the actual frequencies with

which the crimes occur, we have seen that contrary to my hypothesis, broadsheet coverage for the Straits Times has comparable amounts of soft news coverage as the tabloid, and does not better reflect the true statistics than tabloid coverage. Overall, local crime news coverage in the papers observed tends to emphasise more sensationalistic, attention-grabbing offenses like crimes against persons and commercial crime.

This finding has significant implications in the context of the agenda-setting function of the news. While emphasis on such news coverage may attract audiences, the emphasis on violent or outrage-eliciting crime can risk painting a skewed picture of reality. This is because greater news coverage of an issue puts it more in the forefront of people's consciousness, and can end up exaggerating the severity of the violent and commercial crime situation – with possible effects of affecting people's sense of security and trust in society, desensitising them to cases of violent and commercial crime, or drawing attention away from other prevalent crimes that deserve fair attention and action. More equal news coverage, less of a frenzied focus on violence and sensational details, would be important to ensure that the public is correctly informed and not misinformed in what they know about local crime.

Annex A: List of Articles and Codes – see attached PDF