

The Media at Odds With Reality:
A Content Analysis of Local Crime
Coverage in Two South African
Newspapers

I. Introduction

“If it bleeds it leads.”

This is reason why local news organizations throughout the United States rely on the crime script. Episodic crime news costs little to produce (as it simply requires following a police radio scanner), yet generates significant revenue (as audiences find it gripping) [8]. Thus, it is no surprise that crime appeals to local commercial news producers facing extensive competition and market-pressure in the U.S. However, crime, particularly violent crime, is overrepresented in local news, such that many Americans have an inaccurate perception as to how prevalent crime actually is in their society [7]. Gallup poll results reveal that most Americans believe that the nation’s crime problem is getting worse, yet in reality, crime has sharply declined in the U.S. over the last two decades [14]. Clearly, the crime script has set a news agenda that is at odds with reality. In addition, the racialization of local U.S. crime news is quite prominent. A 2005 study showed that “over one-half of all crime reports made explicit reference to race or ethnicity of the suspect” and that “minorities are more likely to be depicted in the role of the suspect” [9]. Thus, local crime coverage confirms and further propagates, throughout U.S. society, the stereotype of non-whites as criminals.

However, while there has been extensive research into the U.S. crime script, there has been little focus on crime coverage in South Africa, one of the most violent, racially tense nations in the world. South Africans live in a “culture of violence,” created by rapid urbanization, organized crime and a youthful population [15]. Compared to the U.S., South Africa has a 54% higher crime level, a 7 times higher murder rate and a 5 times higher rape rate [17]. South Africans are affected daily by crime, whether they are victims of violence or whether they are unable to walk the street or exercise outside simply due to their fear of insecurity [1]. Additionally, remnants of intense racial discrimination during Apartheid still linger in South African society today, and racism between whites and non-whites is much more overt and explicit than it is in the U.S. [10].

My goal is to investigate how these heightened crime rates and racial tensions play out in South Africa’s crime coverage in local news. The media has the power to make crime a salient issue in South Africa, such that the public is focusing on crime and forcing elected officials to address it. Given this power,

it is crucial to analyze whether South Africa's local crime coverage accurately reflects the nation's crime statistics. Because the risk of falling victim to an act of crime is so tremendous in major South African cities, the media should report crime such that the public is thinking about it enough to protect themselves and the African National Congress (ANC) is alerted to take action. However, at the same time, crime should not be overrepresented in local news, such that South Africans develop a misinformed fear of crime that hinders daily life. Additionally, an overrepresentation of crime coverage in the media could lead citizens and public officials to miss or ignore more urgent issues due to a hyper-focus on crime. Finally, the media should be cautious not to stereotype a particular race as criminal, as this could spark collective action among South Africans who suffered from racial discrimination during Apartheid. Thus, the broad question guiding my analysis is: does crime coverage in local South African news accurately reflect the city's actual crime statistics or is there a distortion in the media's representation and racialization of crime as there is the U.S.?

II. Hypothesis

As will be discussed in detail later, my content analysis will analyze the E-editions of two major newspapers, each for a different major city in South Africa. While there are some independently owned South African newspapers, most, including the two sources I have selected, are owned by four large publishing groups: Avusa, Naspers, Independent News and Media and CTP/Caxton [18]. These newspapers are commercial and thus, are likely motivated to produce news that is in high consumer demand. However, because these four conglomerates dominate the South African newspaper industry, I predict that my sources will be less commercialized than local U.S. news sources, as they will be less subject to market pressure and competition. Thus, my theory is that crime coverage in these two South African newspapers will be representative of societal reality.

Because crime levels are high throughout South Africa, I expect there to be substantial crime coverage in both newspapers. However, I hypothesize that the city with more crime overall will be more likely to report on crime and that local crime coverage will align with each city's statistics on crime typology. Additionally, unlike the U.S.' invariably episodic crime coverage, I expect South African crime

coverage to be mostly episodic, yet interspersed with thematic crime news pieces [8]. This will provide readers with broad crime trends and analysis to help them more accurately interpret crime-related instances.

In terms of racialization, I hypothesize that the race of both suspects and victims will be discussed in a majority of crime-related news pieces for both sources, as race is a prominent South African issue that journalists and news consumers are likely focused on nationwide. However, I expect this reporting to also reflect crime statistics, such that if any race dominates the descriptions and images in local crime news, this race should, in actuality, be more highly correlated with crime in that city.

III. Methodology

For five consecutive days (March 2nd to March 6th, 2015) I examined the “news” section of one of the most widely read newspapers in Cape Town (*Cape Times*) and in Johannesburg (*The Star*). *Cape Times* is a morning newspaper with an estimated readership of 200,000 and *The Star* is a daily newspaper with an estimated readership of 840,000. Both of these sources are owned by Independent News and Media SA and written entirely in English [2,19,13].

Each news piece produced by the sources was coded for five variables (Table 1). First, I classified each piece by issue area, to determine the percentage of news coverage dedicated to crime, as well as which issues are in competition with crime. Second, each crime-related piece was classified by type of crime, broken down in to contact crimes (murder, sexual crimes, assault), drug-related crime, property-related theft, kidnapping and other. Third, each crime-related piece was classified as by its framing. Pieces were either episodic, depicting particular instances of criminal acts, or thematic, reporting data and historical crime trends that embed issues of crime in “some general context and take the form of an in-depth, ‘backgrounder’ report” [6]. Fourth, each crime-related piece was classified by whether it included a physical description of the suspect or victim’s race. Finally, each crime-related piece was classified by its visual representation: if it included a picture and if so, if that picture was race-neutral or displayed the race of the suspect or victim.

1. Issue area
2. Contact crime, drug-related crime, property-related theft, kidnapping or other
3. Episodic v thematic
4. Description of race of v no description of race of parties involved
5. No picture, race-neutral picture, picture of white suspect, picture of non-white suspect, picture of white victim, picture of non-white victim

Table 1. Coding variables

To establish inter-coder reliability and ensure that my categories were both exhaustive and mutually exclusive, my roommate used my coding scheme to categorize the same news pieces over the same five-day period. Our classification was almost entirely the same, except for the issue area of two pieces, which we discussed and reached a consensus on. Additionally, after the first day of analysis, I split up the “politics” issue area into more specifically defined areas, as my roommate found them to be distinct enough in their substantive content to warrant further classification.

Once all news pieces were coded, I then compared my results to the 2014 crime statistics for both cities, regarding total number of crimes committed annually and the percentage of this total that applies to specific types of crime. As shown in Table 2, a larger total number of crimes are committed in Cape Town than in Johannesburg. However, while the percentage of contact crimes is much higher Johannesburg, the percentages of drug-related crimes and property-related theft are higher in Cape Town. For both cities, however, the “other” category was by far the largest, encompassing a variety of crimes such as financial crimes, driving under the influence and arson [4, 5].

	Total # of Annual Crimes	% contact crimes	% drug-related crimes	% property-related theft	% kidnapping	% other
Cape Town	18,369	4.8%	11.7%	27.9%	0.1%	55.5%
Johannesburg	14, 791	15.2%	4.9%	14.6%	0.3%	65.0%

Table 2. 2014 crime statistics as reported on www.crimstatssa.com

Despite extensive research, I was unable to locate recent quantitative statistics regarding the percentage of crimes committed by whites versus non-white in these South African cities. However, general trends from the early 2000s, show that non-whites are both the predominant victims and perpetrators of crime in South Africa.

IV. Results

A. Issue Area

A total of 141 and 115 news pieces were coded for *The Star* and *Cape Times* respectively, representing 31 different issue areas as shown in Table 3. Crime accounted for 25.5% of news pieces in *The Star* and 14.8% of pieces in *Cape Times*. Note that the volume burst in the “natural disaster, accident” issue area in both sources was due to particular episodes: a wildfire in Cape Town, and sailors lost at sea

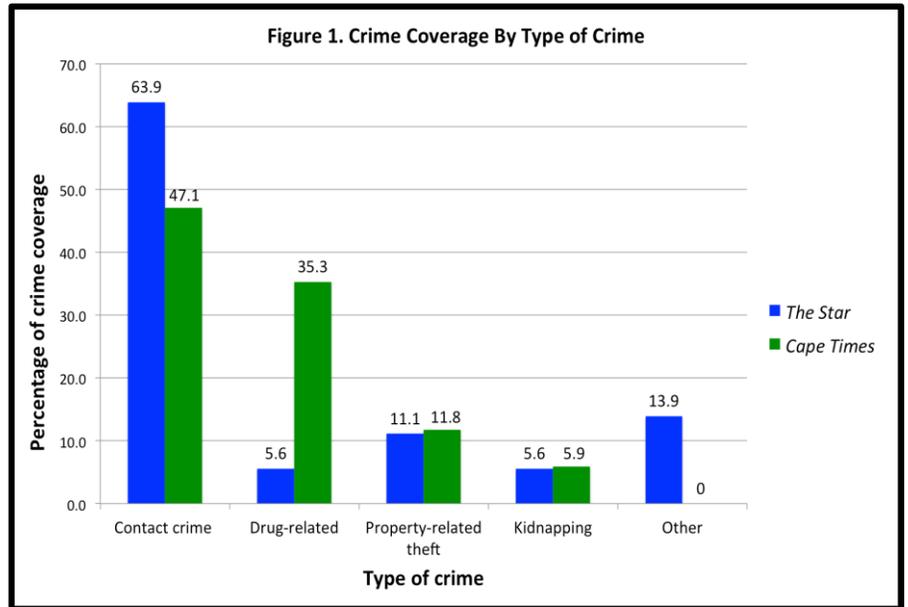
Issue Area	<i>The Star</i>	<i>Cape Times</i>
Crime	25.5	14.8
Natural disasters, accidents	8.5	13.9
Labor unions, strikes	7.8	7.8
Civil rights and liberties	0.7	5.2
Education System and Education Policy	--	1.7
Politics – groups in conflict	0.7	1.7
Politics – candidate performance	4.3	1.7
Politics – issues and ideologies	5.0	5.2
Politics – military/defense	0.7	0.9
Politics – judicial/legal affairs	5.7	6.1
Politics – international foreign aid, other economic issues	1.4	0.9
Politics – elections	2.1	0.9
Politics – international military/defense	0.7	0.9
Politics – morality, values	0.7	1.7
Public safety	0.7	0.9
Science/research	2.8	1.7
Philanthropy	1.4	3.5
Minority groups – discrimination	1.4	3.5
LGBT issues	--	0.9
Poverty, social and welfare policies	--	0.9
Environment, energy	2.1	2.6
Civil strife, unrest	0.7	2.6
Press Media	2.1	0.9
Tourism	--	0.9
Sports, recreation	0.7	2.6
Housing/urban affairs	2.8	2.6
Police corruption	4.3	1.7
Health and medicine	3.5	1.7
International scandal	1.4	0.9
Celebrities, entertainment	7.1	0.9
Travel, transportation	1.4	0.9

Table 3. News pieces by issue area (numbers as % of total news pieces for each source)

in Johannesburg. Similarly, a huge meeting of the leaders of the The Congress of South African Trade Unions was covered extensively by both sources, which explains the high number of news pieces coded as “labor unions, strikes.” These two issue areas might not have been as significant had the content analysis been conducted at a different point in time. Surprisingly, politics-related areas encompassed about one-fifth of news coverage for *Cape Times* (20.0% - even higher than crime coverage) and *The Star* (21.3%). This serves as a stark contrast to the crime script of local U.S. news, where an unregulated market-system, “systematically under produces ‘serious’ news” [8].

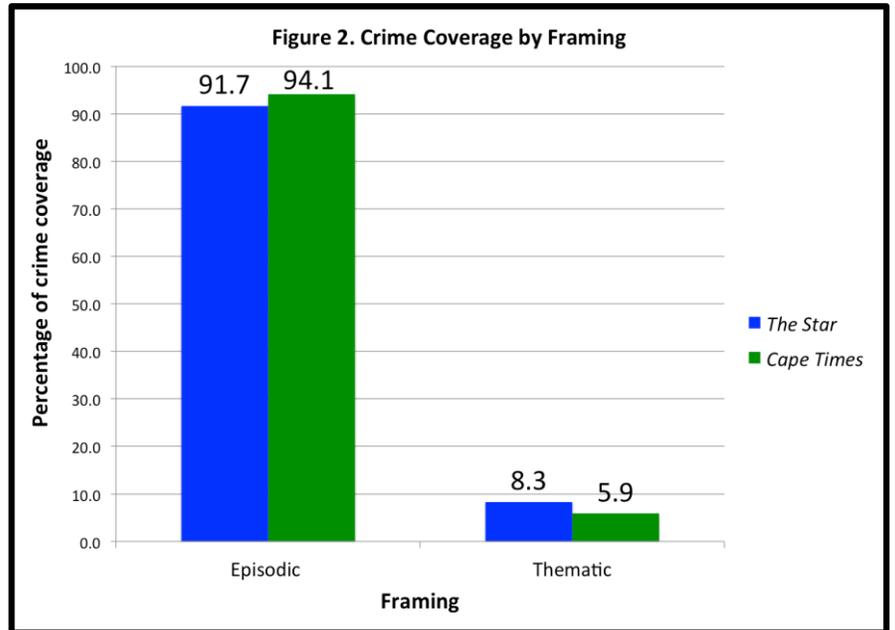
B. Crime Typology

As shown in Figure 1, contact crime was type of crime covered most in both *The Star* (63.9%) and *Cape Times* (47.1%). Both sources' crime coverage included similar percentages of property-related theft and kidnapping. *Cape Times*' crime coverage had a higher percentage of drug-related crime than *The Star* (35.3% and 5.6% respectively). Finally, while *Cape Times*' crime pieces fell into the first four categories, 13.9% of *The Star*'s crime pieces fell into the "other" category, including crimes such as fraud, vandalism, money laundering and reckless driving.



C. Episodic vs. Thematic

For both sources, the framing of crime pieces was largely episodic, as illustrated in Figure 3. Only 1 piece in *Cape Times* (explaining the history of illegal cigarette trade in Cape Town) and 3 pieces in *The Star* (providing a history of xenophobic violence, data on the top 30 "smash and grab" hotspots, and statistics on taxi murders in Johannesburg) were thematic.



D. Racial Description

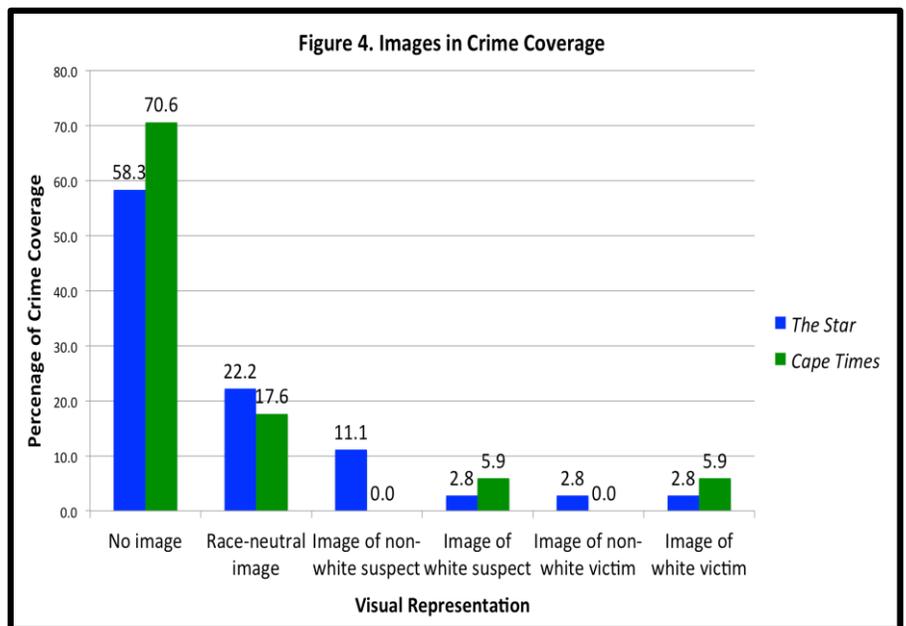
Out of a total of 53 crime-related pieces coded, 36 in *The Star* and 17 in *Cape Times*, not a single piece provided a physical description that referenced the race of either the suspect/perpetrator(s) or the victim(s).

E. Racial Visual Representation

Finally, a majority of crime-related pieces had either no image or a race-neutral/generic image (Figure 3) in both *The Star* (58.3% and 22.2% respectively) and *Cape Times* (70.6% and 17.6% respectively). As shown in Figure 4, *The Star* had a larger total percentage of crime pieces with images of the suspects or victims than *Cape Times*, particularly showing non-white suspects (11.1%). *Cape Times* only had two pieces that displayed race, one (5.9%) of a white suspect and one (5.9%) of a white victim.



Figure 3. Generic image used in multiple crime-related news pieces from *Cape Times*.



V. Interpretation

Contrary to my hypothesis, crime coverage does not seem to align closely with crime statistics in terms of overall crime level or crime typology in these two cities. The issue area results shows that crime coverage was neither the predominant issue area for both sources, nor more likely in Cape Town, where there is a higher total number of annual crimes. In terms of type of crime, my results followed crime statistics in

that *The Star* had the higher percentage of contact crime coverage, and *Cape Times* had the higher percentage of drug-related crime coverage. However, both *The Star*'s percentage of contact crimes (63.9%) and *Cape Times*' percentage of drug-related crime (35.5%) were much higher than the respective crime statistic in each city (15.2% and 11.7%, respectively). Additionally, the fact that *Cape Times* focused almost half of its crime coverage on contact crime does not align with the fact that less than 5% of crimes committed in Cape Town annually are contact crimes. The data aligned with my hypothesis in terms of framing, as there were a few, yet only a small minority, of thematically framed crime pieces that educated readers on crime statistics and historical trends. Thus, compared to the U.S., South African local media seems to rely less on an episodic crime script, despite having higher national crime levels. However, South African local crime coverage seems to be distorted in its inaccurate representation of crime typology in these two cities, with a particular overrepresentation of violent, contact crime.

Finally, the racialization of crime coverage in these two sources largely conflicted with my hypothesis. I expected there to be extensive visual and descriptive reference to race within each crime piece with particular emphasis on non-white suspects and victims. However, my results point to a lack of racialization of crime coverage all together. Crime pieces described perpetrators using race-neutral phrases such as "the accused," "the alleged suspect," or "three transit travelers" [2, 19]. Similarly, for the most part, both sources avoided displaying an image of the parties involved in the crime. Also, while *The Star* showed more pictures of non-white suspects, aligning more with what was expected, *Cape Times* only had pictures of white parties, thus no single race seemed to dominate local crime coverage.

VI. Discussion

Paradoxically, violent contact crime conjures the most fear in readers, yet is also the type of crime that people want to read about and find most compelling and interesting [8]. Thus, it is likely that contact crime was the highest type of crime represented in both *The Star* and *Cape Times*, because it is this type of violent crime that "sells" for these local commercial newspapers. Also, because statistics show that there are more instances of contact crime in Johannesburg than in Cape Town, and contact crime is what sells, this might also explain why *The Star*, and not *Cape Times*, was more likely to cover crime in general. However,

this overrepresentation of contact crime in local news has likely contributed, in part, to the creation of a South African society where “94 percent of people are ‘extremely afraid’ of falling victim to crime” and where “perceptions of insecurity” are irrationally high [11]. One question left unanswered by my results is: how much of this fear is needed and how much of it is unsubstantiated, yet reinforced by the media’s distorted emphasis on contact crime as opposed to other types of crime?

One of the most surprising results was that political news was reported almost as much (*The Star*), or more (*Cape Times*) than crime. However, upon further research, I discovered that since Apartheid’s demise, journalists have embraced Nelson Mandela’s belief that “critical, investigative media is the lifeblood of any democracy” [12]. At the start of South Africa’s democracy under the ANC, journalists were no longer subject to oppressive censorship and were granted freedom of expression and freedom of the press [18]. Now, journalists have dedicated themselves to scrutinizing government practices and critically assessing the ANC’s performance [16]. This focus on investigative journalism among news suppliers likely explains why *The Star* and *Cape Times* both dedicate about one-fifth of their news coverage to political issues. Additionally, investigative journalism is likely also in high demand among news consumers. According to Professor Iyengar, “differences in political culture lead to differences in consumer demand for information” [8]. Thus, while the average American is more interested in soft news, the average South African, due to his or her experience under the oppressive Apartheid government, is likely more of a “political junkie,” demanding information on what the ANC is doing and if beneficial political change is being enacted.

This unveils an additional insight. From this data, it is unclear how the commercialization of local South Africa newspapers compares to local U.S. print news. On one hand, the diversity of issues presented in *The Star* and *Cape Times* could indicate that these sources are more oriented toward civic duty and dedicated to providing locals with the information they need to be good, informed citizens. On the other hand, this news diversity could be the result of highly commercialized sources providing news that appeals to their market audience that demands a larger variety and more substantive news, versus the crime script. Regardless of which is true, the supply of and demand for investigative journalism likely explains why *The Star* and *Cape Times* balanced crime coverage with political coverage.

Finally, the almost complete absence of race from crime coverage was quite unexpected. However upon further research into readership, I discovered that 70% of average *Cape Times* issue readers are non-white (black, coloured, Indian) and similarly, over 50% of *The Star*'s readers are black [3,18]. Thus, it is likely that both sources would offend and lose a lot of readers if crime coverage propagated a stereotype of non-whites as criminals, especially considering the extreme, unjust discrimination of non-whites during Apartheid. This would explain why these newspapers would refrain from racializing crime news, even if non-whites do, in fact, commit a majority of the local crimes. Additionally, because there is so much anti-discrimination activism in South Africa, and because the nation is still very much focused on building a democratic, equal society since Apartheid, journalists might be de-racializing crime, so as not to propagate any stereotypes that would only further racially divide society [21].

VII. Conclusion

The results of this content analysis reveal that in two local South African newspapers, *The Star* and *Cape Times*: 1) The crime script is not as heavily relied on as it is in the U.S. 2) Crime coverage is fairly unrepresentative of each city's crime statistics, with an overrepresentation of episodic contact crime. 3) There is lack of racialization of crime coverage.

One weakness of this study is that it was conducted over a very short period of time, when specific, non-crime related incidents (Cape Town wildfire, COSATU meeting) were receiving a large percentage of news coverage. Thus, I would recommend performing a longer period of analysis, multiple times throughout the year. This would provide a more comprehensive idea of South Africa's local crime coverage and how it changes depending on what is happening throughout the nation and in particular cities.

Finally, I noticed that while suspects and victims were never described by their race in crime news pieces, they were often described by their gender. Thus, future studies should focus on the "genderization" of South Africa's local crime coverage. Given that there is an epidemic of violence against women in South Africa, where "one woman is killed by her husband or boyfriend every six hours" I wonder if the local media has constructed and propagated a stereotype of males as criminals, or refrained from gender stereotyping as it has with race [20].

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