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# A STUDY OF CRIME REPORTING BY TWO MALAYSIAN ENGLISH NEWSPAPERS

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## ABSTRACT

Crime reporting covers criminal behavior, its causes, patterns, and effects upon society. The general aim of this study is to assess the level of crime coverage by Malaysian English newspapers in an effort to examine crime news in Malaysia. Getting accurate fact about crimes, their differences as well as the frequency of crime reporting in national dailies is useful for understanding crime in society. It will also take into account the public's responses about the occurrences of crime. It necessitates that the content of the newspaper reports concerning criminal acts or crime related issues be analyzed. A simple content analysis was undertaken to examine media reports of crime in *The Star* and *News Straits Times (NST)*, two language English dailies in Malaysia.

The data in Table 8 indicates that both newspapers report crimes committed by Malaysians more than foreigners.

**Keywords:** *Crime, Malaysia, Mass Media, English newspapers, Content analysis.*

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, violent crime is a crime in which an offender who uses or threatens force upon a victim which includes murder, rape, assault, ng robbery, armed robbery as well as robbery without firearms. A property crime, on the other hand, involves the theft or vandalism of property but does not involve force or threat of force against victims which includes robbery, car, motorbike and house theft, break-in and burglary.

According to Baer & Chambliss (1997) in America, FBI confirms that “there is a murder every 23 minutes, a forcible rape every 5 minutes, a robbery every 51 seconds, a burglary every 12 seconds”. Crime is not only damaging to social wellbeing but also constitute threats to societal development. Earlier studies, most especially those in the last century, laid foundation to research on media coverage of crimes with some suggesting that official crime rates and crime news coverage are unrelated and that the public’s conception of crime more accurately reflects the picture of crime presented in the newspapers, although others disagree with this argument. (Barak, 1988; Sacco, 1995; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981).

Media involvement in the reporting of crimes becomes much more a center of attraction for media researchers interested in the hypothesis that news coverage of crime is somehow correlated with a consequential increase in crime rates, generating concerns on what kind of influence media reportage has on crime. Other crucial aspects that also need to be examined are the issues surrounding the coverage, factors influencing news selection in relation to crime issues and the conflicting interests of the media, public, law enforcement agencies, government and criminals or the accused in dictating the structure of the crime news.

A report by the Malaysian Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP) Amar Singh Sidhu (2005), reveals that the local media, most especially newspapers, have been actively reporting crime and violence in Malaysia. There have been a considerable number of reports about snatch thefts, rapes and other sexual crimes, assaults and murders, child abuse and ill-treatment of foreign maids, hold-ups, and thefts, kidnappings, including fatal road accidents in the local newspapers. With this barrage of media reports, it inevitably increases the anxiety and fear about the impending dangers perceived by society.

Two important caveats need to be mentioned in discussing crime rate. Firstly, it is conceptually and practically impossible to predict crime rate without taking into consideration the projection based on reliable statistical analyses or empirical justification. Secondly, apart from media contribution, there are various variables that influence the rate of crime.

The general aim of this study is to assess the level of crime coverage by Malaysian English newspapers as an impetus towards understanding the crime rate as well as the categories of crimes committed.

Among the specific objectives of this study are:

1. To compare the rate of crime reporting in the two Malaysian daily newspapers that are published in the English language so as to ascertain what crimes are commonly reported and what types of crimes feature more in one newspaper than the other;
2. To ascertain the average number of crime reported per day in each of the selected newspapers and the overall number of crime reported within the period of the study to determine their ratio in the overall crime rate reported;
3. To examine how the details of the crime stories were reported in the newspapers in order to assess the significance that the newspapers give to crime reportage
4. To explore the contents of the crime stories in the newspapers to measure the ratio of reports of crimes committed by Malaysians versus those committed by foreigners living in Malaysia.

Related to the research objectives above, this study aims to address the following research questions:

- Q1. Which form of crime is given more attention in the newspaper than others in terms of the frequency of reportage?
- Q2. Which of the two English newspapers under consideration publishes more crime news than the other?
- Q3. What degree of significance do newspapers attached to crime stories compared to other stories?
- Q4. How detailed are the crime news reported by the newspapers in term of 'who', 'how', 'when', 'where', and 'what'?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been well established that unlike many other publications, are not merely profit driven. As a matter of fact, in the freedom of the press lies the fundamental responsibility to disseminate information and create public awareness to report not only what had happened, but also what is happening, predicting what may happen in the near future, and also suggesting possible solutions to societal problems. Indeed, news organizations have a remarkable history of providing the public with essential news, particularly about politics and also about crime. This role accounts for why civilization of a democratic society needs mass media to ensure political accountability can be sustained and crime rate can be reduced.

Mass media plays a fundamental role in contemporary society because of the relatively exclusive power they possess, which help them to decide which issues are important for the public to know about. Indeed, mass media are believed to have substituted all other social institutions as the single most influential in matters related to information gathering, processing and distribution to enhance public knowledge. Taylor (2009) emphasizes that the mass media shapes public perception, influence public policy, and thus, reinforce social control and initiate necessary change with respect to crime, particularly domestic violence. Such influence is very important for the reformation of every society.

Various studies have discussed that the procedure involved in news selection is a function that reporters and/or editors consider as newsworthy, and the level of newsworthiness assigned to a story affects the amount of attention given to such story in terms of furnishing the story with all the necessary details required by the readers to make informed decisions regarding the story (Chermak, 1995; Meyers, 1997; Pritchard & Hughes, 1997). The determination of newsworthiness is based primarily on the unusualness or the level of sensationalism a story contains (Carmody, 1998; Chermak, 1995; Meyers, 1997). The degree of the unusualness of a story and how newsworthy a story is considered to be, determine the level of prominence that such a story receives in the newspaper as well as the attention it enjoys in term of the news hole. Taylor (2009) cites Chermak (1995, p.169) while explaining the kind of attention that the majority of crime stories enjoy in the newspapers. According to Chermak, "The news media have firmly established the fact that crimes against certain victims are more newsworthy and deserving of more news coverage than others". He emphasizes that:

Crime stories are generally displayed prominently because of their heightened newsworthiness. Furthermore, the characteristics of the crime, including demographics of the victim and perpetrator and where the crime was committed, interact to determine both the newsworthiness of a crime and the prominence of a story in the media.

Even though Malaysia's crime levels aren't as high as the level of crime is some developing countries such as India, or Pakistan, violent crime, appears to be rising. Crime rate has doubled from 2000 to 2009 and even with the tough restriction of gun control laws, crimes are on a spike in Malaysia. These crimes are probably the result of the population growth over time; Malaysians rarely trust what they perceive as ineffectual policing to combat crimes and arrest criminals.

## NEWSPAPER AGENDA-SETTING OF CRIME NEWS STORIES

It has been extensively argued that the media set the public's agenda (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). McCombs and Shaw (1972) clarified that the convincing arguments that arose from agenda setting and other later improvements on the theory peg the reign of the hypodermic notion, which proves that the media tells us what to think in favour of a more nuanced assertion that media tell people what to think.

The agenda-setting theory is one of the key elements in the media effect theories that establishes how mass media prioritize events suggest some events are more important to the audience than the others. Agenda-setting together with cultivation theory both originate from the media effect theories. Cultivation theory emphasises that there are far more powerful and worrisome effects of watching television than merely making certain issues seemed more important than the others. The basic premise of cultivation theory is that the "television world" is very different from the "real world," most notably in its propensity for violence and mayhem (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Eleey, JacksonBeeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1977).

## METHODS

This study aims to examine and analyze crime reporting in two English language Malaysian newspapers for the month of June, 2015. The decision to examine the coverage of the newspapers during the year 2015 was due to various reasons that could have play a major role in a crime hike: (1) the year 2015 was likely to be called as the year of political conflicts when the negotiations between the Malaysian government and the opposition coalition reached an impasse; (2) Malaysia in 2015 had faced some real challenges, for example the fluctuation of oil prices, the falling value of the ringgit, a slowdown in the rate of economic growth and a rise in unemployment rates; (3) the increased cost of living. The implementation of the Government Service Tax (GST), the withdrawal of petrol subsidies, the significant hikes of public transport and toll rates. Stagnant median household incomes, a slowing economy, and a comatose currency mean a lot more money is required to buy a lot less. Middle-class families are holding on to their tenuous economic status by the tips of their fingernails, with an increasing poverty among Malaysians. These reasons had led to a profound increase of the crime rate in Malaysia.

Using the content analysis method, the focus of the study is on how the newspaper 'frame' crime issues: the attention given to the stories; how in-depth are the stories treated; what types of sources or authorities cited; what is the relative number of reports of crime committed by Malaysians compared to foreigners; which part of Malaysia do media reports crime focus on; and which of the two newspapers had more reports on crime than the other.

Much more important than the content analysis method employed is the codification of the contents of the crime stories, which dictates the type of frames identified as well as the relationship with the media agenda setting theory discussed earlier. The selection of

the relevant news stories for analysis was made based on specific targets particularly on issues related to Malaysia’s economic challenges during the selected period that could have contributed to the crime rate. The way the media reports the stories during a time when the nation was facing economic challenges could have resulted in certain implications including to the need to ensure that the right policies are put in place to address rising crime rates.

**FINDINGS**

In this study, the researcher examined crime reports from *The Star* and *NST* for three months which started from the month of June, 2015. It was found that *The Star* carried the largest coverage followed by *NST*.

**Table 1: Frequency of crime coverage**

Newspaper	Frequency	Percent
The Star	39	60.0
NST	26	40.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 shows that a total of 65 articles are reported in both of the newspapers and the majority of the articles are reported in *The Star* newspaper. In *The Star* crime reports scores 60% compared to 40% in *NST*.

**Table 2: Type of crimes reported in *The Star* and *NST***

Crime Type	<i>The Star</i> Frequency	<i>The Star</i> Percent	<i>NST</i> Frequency	<i>NST</i> Percent
Violence	29	74.4	20	76.9
	10	25.6	6	23.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2 indicates that the reported violent crimes have the lion share in both newspapers compared to property crimes. The act of violence reported in both of the newspapers is more than half of crime news. In *The Star* out of 39 reports, the frequency of 29 reports on violent crimes are found compared to only 10 for property crime. While in *NST* out of 26 crimes reported, violent crimes are reported 20 times compared to only 6 reports of property crime in *NST*.

**Table 3: Photos in *The Star* and *NST* crime news**

Photo	<i>The Star</i> Frequency	<i>The Star</i> Percent	<i>NST</i> Frequency	<i>NST</i> Percent
With Photo	7	17.9	8	30.8
Without Photo	32	82.1	18	69.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3 shows that both of the newspapers publish few photos to accompany their news articles about crime. The number of photos published in both newspapers are quite low. During the month of June 2015, only seven out of 39 news articles on crimes had photos in *The Star* and only eight out of 26 *NST* news report on crime carried any photos..

**Table 4: Frequency of *The Star* reporting of crimes in each state**

State	Frequency	Percent
Johor	1	2.6
Kedah	2	5.1
Kelantan	2	5.1
Melaka	1	2.6
Negeri Sembilan	1	2.6
Perak	1	2.6
Selangor	12	30.8
Kuala Lumpur	9	23.1
Sabah	1	2.6
Pulau Pinang	7	17.9
Terengganu	2	5.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 4a: Frequency of *NST* reporting of crimes in each state**

State	Frequency	Percent
Johor	1	3.8
Kedah	1	3.8
Kelantan	2	7.7
Negeri Sembilan	1	3.8
Selangor	7	26.9
Kuala Lumpur	8	30.8
Sarawak	2	7.7
Pulau Pinang	4	15.4
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4 and 4A depict the frequency of crime incidents across the states in Malaysia. The distribution of crime stories across the states in Malaysia is highly skewed in the newspapers under study. News coverage in *The Star* and *NST* imply that certain states have high incidences of crime, while others seem to be safer with few incidences of crime. Both newspapers carried a high percentage of news reports of crime in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, with 30.8% of *The Star's* crime news reporting about crime in Selangor, and 23.1% about crimes that occurred in of Kuala Lumpur. Similarly, 26.9% of *NST*

crime news stories focused on Selangor, and 30.8% focused on Kuala Lumpur. As with Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang was featured almost as extensively, at third place, in crime reports by both newspapers. 17.9% of crime stories in *The Star* and 15.4% of *NST*'s crime stories.

It is possible that the high number of crime news coming from these three states may be related to the actual rate of crime in these states. The Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) on 6 Nov 2013 reported in *Selangor Kini* that Selangor is rampant with criminal activities such as shootings and other crimes possibly due to it being over-populated. Selangor Police Chief, Datuk Mohd Shukri Dahlan, said that the population of this state comprised of various races and foreigners who often visit the state for a variety of reasons and some of them have been found to commit crimes. He said that the crime index in Malaysia, as a whole, is greatly influenced by events in Selangor, at a rate of about 40%. Earlier, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) confirmed that Selangor recorded the highest crime index compared to other states, involving a total of 32,348 cases from January to September 2013.

**Table 5: Crime news sources in *The Star* and *NST***

Source	<i>The Star</i> Frequency	<i>The Star</i> Percent	<i>NST</i> Frequency	<i>NST</i> Percent
Police	33	84.6	17	65.4
Others	6	15.4	9	34.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 5 indicates that both newspapers depend highly on the police as their primary source of crime news, with a percentage of 84.6% for *The Star* and 65.4% for *NST*. Although the journalists use the formal police communications services, they are not fully dependent on them. They also develop and maintain informal contacts with those in the police department and draw on both official and unofficial sources in their daily work. By doing so, they continue to hold the police to account.

**Table 6: Crime news article size in *The Star* and *NST***

Size	<i>The Star</i> Frequency	<i>The Star</i> Percent	<i>NST</i> Frequency	<i>NST</i> Percent
Half page	2	5.1	4	15.4
Quarter page	15	38.5	13	50.0
Smaller than quarter page	22	56.4	19	34.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Data in Table 6 presents the result of the size of the crime report. The majority of crime reports in both newspapers are the size between a quarter and less than a quarter of the page. Table 6 shows that *The Star* reports are frequently the size of less than a quarter with a percentage of 56.6% compared to *NST* with only 34.6%. Both of the newspapers use the format of tabloid newspapers.

**Table 7: Crime news article page location in *The Star* and *NST***

Page location	<i>The Star</i> Frequency	<i>The Star</i> Percent	<i>NST</i> Frequency	<i>NST</i> Percent
Outer pages	0	0	0	0
Inner pages	39	100.0	26	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 7 shows that all the 65 crime reports have been reported in the inner pages of the newspaper. The pages where crime stories appear in the sampled newspapers are coded into two: front-page stories and inside-page stories. The inside-page story constitutes the inner-page, centre-spread and back-page stories. The analyses show that none of the 65 crime stories from both newspapers was reported on the front page of the newspapers. The newspapers might refrain from making crime stories front-page news in order not to appear to glorify crime because indirectly, doing so would be detrimental to society.

**Table 8: Criminals' nationality reported in *The Star* and *NST***

Criminals' nationality	<i>The Star</i> Frequency	<i>The Star</i> Percent	<i>NST</i> Frequency	<i>NST</i> Percent
Malaysian	30	76.9	17	65.4
Foreigner	5	12.8	5	19.2
Unknown	4	10.3	4	15.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100.0</b>

The data in Table 8 indicates that both newspapers report crimes committed by Malaysians more than foreigners. Out of the 39 crimes that have been reported in *The Star*, only 5 have been committed by foreigners and the remaining 30 crimes have been committed by Malaysians. The remaining reports in both of the newspapers have not mentioned whether the crimes have been committed by locals or foreigners. *NST* reports similar patterns of crimes as *The Star*, out of 26 crimes only 5 have been committed by foreigners and 17 have been committed by Malaysians.

## CONCLUSION

A total of 65 articles, published in the two newspapers, pertaining to crimes have been identified and examined. *The Star* scored the highest number of articles. However, the data indicated that there was a great difference between the numbers of articles published by the two newspapers. These archival analyses offer a better understanding of the crimes in Malaysia. The information from the analyses could be used to differentiate crime incidents and types of crimes that persist in Malaysia. The knowledge derived from this study is considered vital to criminal justice figures in order to figure out and implement solutions and risk-focused crime preventions. Therefore, it is anticipated that the present study would be of benefit to determine the typology of crime in Malaysia which is parallel to the aim of Malaysia's National Key in crime reduction.

It is well known that crime and violence are in general the media's choice topics, and during this critical time, audience tends to rely on the media to get information and to make



sense of their surroundings. Without a doubt, media may have an impact on the readers and shape their opinions towards certain issues due to the way they narrate the news story (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Yaser et. al 2011). Journalists are encouraged to be objective in providing true information about the problem as well as publishing the opinions of the two sides of the conflict to motivate the public to aware of the crimes occurring around them.

However, it must be noted that a sizeable proportion of the crimes goes unreported in the media. Many more also go unreported to authorities. Research shows that the decision to report a crime depends upon a whole range of factors, such as the place where it was perpetrated, the identity of the offender and whether it was thought appropriate to report to the police (Mayhew, Elliott & Dowds, 1989).

These unreported crimes reflect the dark figures of crime. Thus, the actual number of violence in Malaysia is estimated to be much higher. What is known is probably equal or less than what is hidden. The number of crime stories seem high, and suggest that a very high rate of crime in society, however, there are more crimes than we are likely to ever know.

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