



If it bleeds, it leads

A comparative analysis of the amount of crime reporting carried in two daily New Zealand newspapers across the same month of the same year (May, 2009)



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Outline

- Look at the proportion of crime news as part of overall hard news content in The Southland Times and Otago Daily Times for a month (May 2009).
- Analyse content amounts. Consider trends and comparisons between the two data sets, and with previous studies.
- Compare that with crime statistics and consider whether coverage of crime news is disproportional to the amount of crime.
- Talk to the newspaper Editors (Southland Times and Otago Daily Times) about the comparative results.

Previous studies

- A 1988 study by Judy McGregor found crime news accounted for 10.54% of the “hard news” hole in Palmerston North’s Manawatu Standard over a month.
- In a 1992 study, coverage of crime news in New Zealand’s five metropolitan newspapers over a month revealed 16.44% of the hard news hole in the newspapers was crime news (McGregor, 1993).
- A similar study in 2001 of New Zealand’s metropolitan newspapers over a month showed 19.63% crime news (McGregor, 2001)



THE PRESS

The Otago Daily Times.

The Evening Post

The New Zealand Herald

THE
DOMINION
POST

Previous studies – cont'd

- 1992 study conducted in June (30 days) while 2001 study conducted in July (31 days).
- Neither month in previous studies particularly significant for crime.
- 2001 study showed that on two days New Zealand Herald crime content was 55.64% and 46.90% respectively.
- Lundy trial depositions accounted for that spike.
- Crime news and court most dominant categories.
- Tiny number of stories about police operations/legislative activities.
- The Press and ODT carried large amounts of regular court news.

Methodology



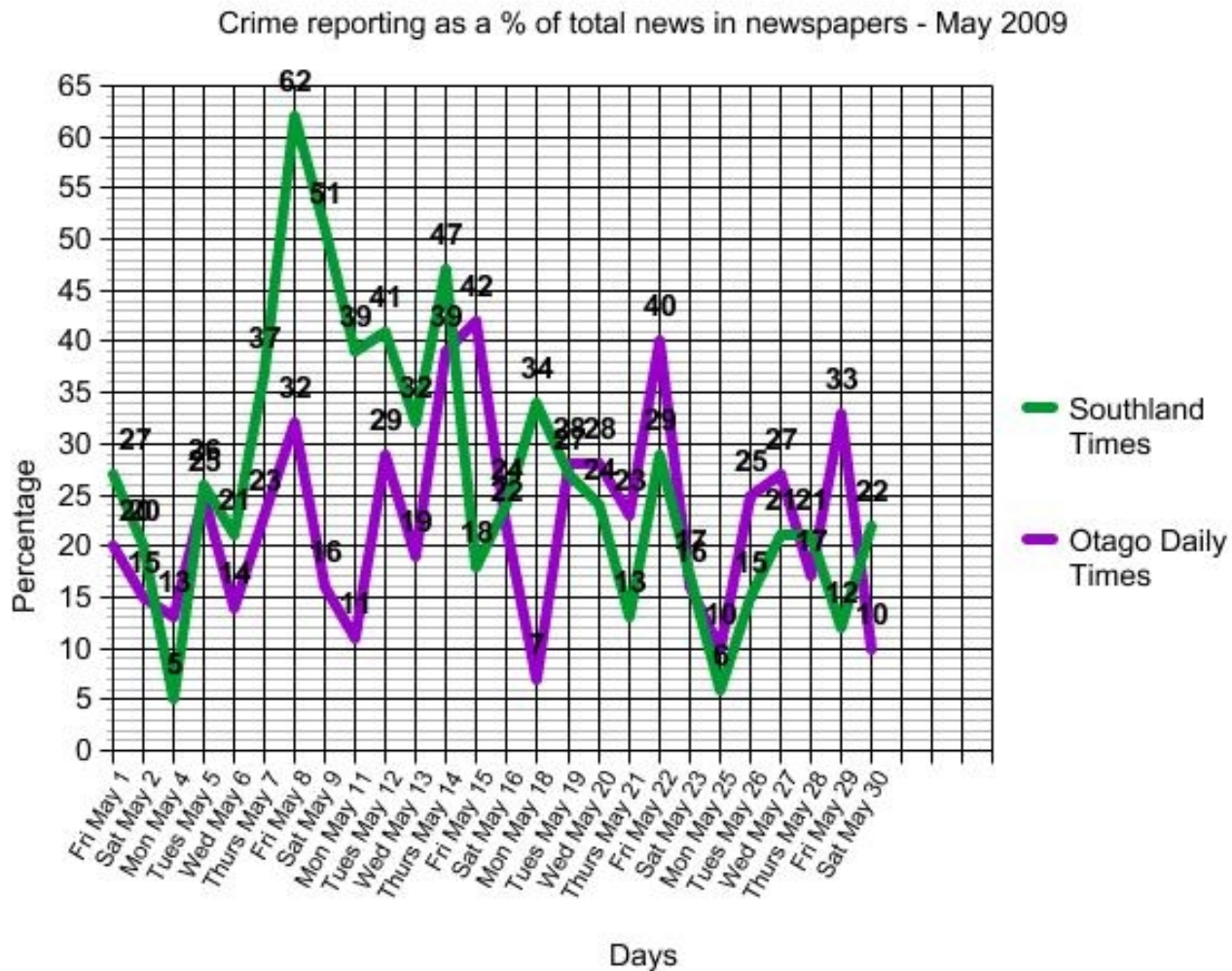
- Stuck to parameters used in Judy McGregor's previous studies:
 1. News about crime incidents
 2. Specific police operations/activities
 3. Legislative activity about crime/policing
 4. Court reporting
- (NOTE: measured “hard news” minus advertisements, editorials, opinion pieces, business and sport sections. May 2009, chosen randomly.)

Content Analysis

- Southland Times crime news as proportion of total general news for month = **26.17%**
- Otago Daily Times crime news as proportion of total general news for month = **21.80%**

- Southland Times total crime news in pages 1-3 = **42%** of total crime news.
- Otago Daily Times total crime news in pages 1-3 = **43%** of total crime news.

Crime reporting as a % of news - May 2009



Content analysis cont'd

- May 2009 was a very high profile month for crime news, with the Bain trial, the so-called Maori 'exorcism' trial after Janet Moses' death and the Napier siege (Jan Molenaar).
- A significant proportion (42% and 43% respectively) of crime news is carried in pages 1-3.
- When we consider court list reporting is usually nearer the back of newspapers, this shows crime news is very prominent in the Southland Times and ODT.
- The amount of space given to reporting court list offences (the majority being Summary Offences Act offences or lower profile trials) is significant - accounting for 1/3-1/2 of all crime content).

Content analysis cont'd

- Southland Times peaked at 62% on May 8 (Napier siege, Bain trial, exorcism trial, court lists).
- Otago Daily Times peaked at 42% on May 15 (Bain, Dunedin court list, court trials).
- A significant % of the Southland Times crime figure also relates to Invercargill, Gore, Balclutha, Queenstown and Alexandra list court/defended hearing/trial reports.
- A significant % of the Otago Daily Times crime figure also relates to Dunedin, Oamaru, Balclutha, Queenstown and Alexandra list/trial court reports.

High profile stories

Southland Times:

- Bain trial featured on 20 days in the month
- Maori 'exorcism' trial featured on 14 days in the month
- Napier siege (Jan Molenaar) featured on 10 days in the month (after it occurred on May 7)
- Westpac theft and duo absconding featured 5 stories (after occurring on May 21).
- Other prominent court stories: Millie Elder, Bailey Junior Kuarariki, Christchurch anti-smacking conviction, Tony Veitch (arguments over release of police files), Billy the hunted one (appears in court).

High profile stories

Otago Daily Times:

- Bain trial featured on 20 days in the month
- Maori 'exorcism' trial featured on 6 days in the month
- Napier siege featured 9 times
- Westpac stolen millions featured 4 times
- Wanganui patch ban
- Duckshooting fatality featured twice
- Marie Davis murder trial featured twice
- Veitch case OIA request featured twice
- Other high profile court stories: Stolen war medals, Michael Swann fraud case, anti-smacking conviction, Millie Elder, SIT fraud, Phillip Field, Billy 'the hunted one'

High profile month for crime



Police activities/legislative activities stories

- **Both newspapers consistently featured stories on police activities /operations and legislative activities but it was not a significant amount of space compared to that given to crime and court coverage . Stories included:**
- Gangs 3-strikes policy
- Brash emails
- Boy racer car crushing bill
- Liquor licensing operations
- Speeding operation
- Customs searches – weapons finds
- Police bravery awards
- Meth house testing/for potential buyers
- Drug dogs
- Police officer drink driving case
- Encrypting police radios
- Schools preparation for shooting events
- Corrections prison open day
- Home detention (success of)
- Court open day
- Boot camp bill
- Youth Court judge concerns
- 'P' pre-cursor ban x2
- Tasers



Crime statistics



Police statistics for 2009 calendar year show:

- Violent crime up more than 9%, with total recorded crime up by 4.6%
- This includes reported domestic violence, which was up more than 18% - something police put down to more reporting of domestic violence.
- Vast majority of crime is dishonesty (50%), drink-driving, minor drug convictions etc
- Reported crime in southern district (south of Waitaki River)
2007: 28,760 2008: 28,707 2009: 28,601 (source: police.govt.nz)
- “One in every 10 Aucklanders is likely to experience a crime of some sort – most of those unlucky ones being victims of burglary.” (source: stuff.co.nz, 1/4/2009)

Feedback

Otago Daily Times Editor Murray Kirkness:

- May 2009 is a month that skews figures but most months you will find there's a pretty high % of crime news.
- ODT compartmentalised so local/national crime news tends to be on pages 1-3.
- There's no doubt crime news sells
- As demonstrated by popularity of crime shows on television – NCIS etc - public has a fascination with underbelly of society and gangs, mafia types.
- “We're careful about what we print.” – how much detail is too much detail? Readership always has to be considered.
- People sometimes complain but they **always** read it and discuss it with friends/family: not like it but still read it?
- A lot of discussion/thought goes into decisions on content and placement of crime – especially “horrific” crime.

Otago Daily Times

“It’s not a case of ‘that’s a crime story we’ll bang it on page one’.”

- Murray Kirkness, Editor, Otago Daily Times

Conclusions

- Conclusions from previous studies are true today - people like to read about crime – we are equally repulsed and fascinated with the underbelly of society.
- Crime news is relatively easy to source – police and courts.
- Crime news is prominent in the two newspapers studied – it makes for good copy and good pictures. But editors insist a lot of thought goes into placement.
- Extensive court reporting in the two dailies surveyed accounts for a significant proportion of the crime news figures. Reporting of crime is part of the justice system – justice being seen to be done.
- Raises the age old question of whether the crime is “of public interest” or “interesting to the public”.
- How many people feel crime is relevant to them? How many of us are actually affected by crime? At all? On a day-to-day basis? Is that a consideration?
- Some news that affects more people is considered “worthy but dull”. Perhaps crime news is the opposite sometimes “unworthy but fascinating”. Victims of crime would, of course, disagree.
- Proportion of crime news appears to be on the rise, however, there are marked differences between the newspapers studied in the four surveys to date. The variables – such as spikes in crime news in certain months – need contextualised through more research.