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Sensationalism in Newspapers: A Look at The Reporter and Amandala in Belize 2010 – 2014

Deseree L.P. Cain-Arzu
dlc9908@rit.edu

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The Rochester Institute of Technology

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Sensationalism in Newspapers:

A Look at *The Reporter* and *Amandala* in Belize 2010 – 2014

by

Deseree L. P. Cain-Arzu

A *Thesis* submitted

in partial fulfillment of the Master of Science degree

in Communication & Media Technologies

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of
Deseree L. P. Cain-Arzu presented on May 5, 2016.

Patrick Scanlon, Ph.D.
Director and Professor of Communication
School of Communication

Rudy Pugliese, Ph.D.
Professor of Communications
School of Communication
Thesis Advisor

LaVerne McQuiller Williams, Ph.D., J.D.
Chairperson and Professor
Department of Criminal Justice
Thesis Advisor

Grant Cos, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Communication
Director of Graduate Programs
School of Communication

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2010 – 2014

Deseree L. P. Cain-Arzu

School of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

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Abstract

Belize has been named among the list of 10 most violent countries in the world. The news media in Belize have been known to use crime stories as headlines in both electronic and print, but there has never been a formal study to determine how prevalent and sensational. This research seeks to address the question of whether two of Belize's most-read newspapers, the *Reporter* and the *Amandala*, have more sensational stories in their headlines, and how these stories compare to government and other human interest news. A sample of 120 front-page headlines/stories spanning a five-year period – from January 2010 through December 2014 – were content-analyzed to determine the ratio of sensational news to “other” news headlines.

Keywords: sensationalism, headlines, violence, newspapers

Sensationalism in Newspapers:

A Look at *The Reporter* and *Amandala* in Belize 2010 – 2014

Everyone has at some point in their lives experienced crime in one way or another, either as a victim or as the friend or family of a victim or perpetrator. We have also been exposed to news headlines sensationalizing acts of violence, often favoring the victims and condemning the perpetrators. This is especially true in small communities in developing nations like Belize, where crime already is rampant and where everyone knows someone who has been affected.

Without a doubt, we live in a world filled with violence (Kirkhorn, 1996). Violent crime does not just affect its victims and perpetrators; it also disturbs those who are close to both sides. It affects the society, the community, the culture and way of life, and it touches the country, the nation, and the world (Kirkhorn, 1996). Additionally, violent crime affects the media who report on it, and, it does so, from an economic standpoint. The way a story is reported is important for many news media, especially since many entities thrive on ratings, and sensationalizing stories plays a role in that attracting an audience (Richardson, 2007).

This holds especially true for developing nations such as Belize, which, just last year, was listed by the United Nations as number 3 in the top 10 most murderous countries in the world (Global Status Report on Violence Prevention, 2014). Murder is more widespread in Latin America (of which Belize is a part), than anywhere else in the world (INCSR, 2015).

The sensationalizing of news is an important topic to discuss, not just as a field of study, but also as something that extends across borders and something that can shape a society negatively or positively (Ducat, Thomas, & Blood, 2009). But are there any differences in the way Belize's print media report on crime?

The purpose of this paper is to determine whether there are differences in the way crime is reported in the two most-read newspapers in Belize. Previous studies have looked at various aspects of crime itself in specific newspapers (Bullock, 2008; Ducat et al., 2009; Kirkhorn, 1996; Rodgers & Thorson, 2001). Previous research have studied sensationalism mostly in television news in North America, Europe, Asia and other areas, but there is little information available about sensationalism in Caribbean or Latin American media.

Crime and Violence in Belize

Crime and violence have been affecting our society for as long as we can remember; so much so that today it is regarded as cultural as well as a social reality (Kirkhorn, 1996), meaning that it has become part and parcel of everyday life in many communities, that many have come to accept it as normalcy.

Crime is a grave concern in Belize, because of its small population (approximately 360,000) and the fact that many individuals, especially young people, have been either victims or have witnessed someone close to them being attacked or injured (Gayle, 2010). Additionally, in close to 87% of cases young men in gangs have reported seeing someone being killed (Gayle, 2010). The same study indicated that many of the criminal activities that occur in Belize, especially those that are gang related, are also politically linked. This is of grave concern because the politicians are also makers of the laws which govern crime and prosecute criminal activity.

In 2014, the United Nations named Belize as one of the top 10 countries worldwide with the most murders per capita and one of the most corrupted nations (Global Status Report on Violence Prevention, 2014). Murder rates have been five to eight times higher in the Americas than they have been in Europe and Asia (CNN, 2014). And according to the Pan American

Health Organization (PAHO), violence is one of the main causes of death in the Latin American region (Perez, 2013).

Sensationalism in Tabloids

Sensationalism has been associated mostly with the tabloid press (Bromley & Stephenson, 1998). It characterizes how journalists use and present news articles or information to the public to create interest, stir tension, or incite agitation (Ducat et. al., 2009). Usually, this is done through bias or overhyped pieces or news stories. Stead (1886), who believes elements of sensationalism in news media have been occurring since the late nineteenth century, argues that journalists “wields enormous influence” (p. 5) when they report the news. It is therefore imperative that these journalists understand the power that sensational and erroneous information can have on endorsing misguided public opinions (Ducat et. al., 2009).

The public learns as much as journalists choose to tell them about violent crimes such as murder, assault, rape and other sex crimes, and domestic violence (Kirkhorn, 1996), but this increased emphasis intentionally distorts reality so as to create sensationalism. Huston (2014) points to recent publicity and sensationalism by the media of police brutality. According to his article, the US is undergoing a misperception because there is no upsurge in police brutality but solely an increase in the reporting of confrontations due to an abundance of cell phones and portable video devices by the public. Journalists are dramatizing news in an attempt to have the listening, viewing, and reading public focus on the violence to the extent where it now seems that violence and victims are part of the reporting practice (Kirkhorn, 1996).

Agenda-Setting and Media-Framing

News media use leading “frames” of reference to create sensational storylines that are intended to attract attention and promote sales but not to offer the public truthful information

(Ducat et al., 2009). This technique is what McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (1972) refer to as agenda-setting and what Goffman (1974) expanded on, and was later modified as the framing theory. In the agenda-setting theory, the argument is that media sets the public agenda by telling the public what to think about, while in the framing theory, Goffman argues media must “frame” their stories by telling the public how to think about the issue.

Agenda-setting theorists posit that agencies of mass communication have significant impact on audiences by their choice of the news items they deem interesting or important and the prominence and space they allocate to them (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1972). While they are unable to dictate to their audience what to think, journalists are able to manipulate the public by controlling what is shown or read so that readers or viewers come to believe what is offered as an interpretation of the major things that are really happening (McCombs et al., 1972). However, when the audience is aware of issues and events that are occurring in their community or in the world, the media are not as able to influence people’s attitudes. As a result, journalists are only able to shape what the public discusses if they present stories with which the public is not yet acquainted (Ducat et al., 2009.).

Media framing is an extension of the agenda-setting theory. If individuals are unaware of what is happening in their communities, they are more reliant on the news media for information as well as interpretation of those events. Goffman (1972) argues that individuals interpret what is happening in the world primarily through the use of frameworks, which are taken for granted. Many times the media serve as this framework. In essence, people attach meanings to events by using the media’s interpretation of those events.

As with the visual importance that is placed in online newspapers’ headlines, the tone of a news article is an indication of the journalist’s “framing” of that story or article. In a study of

how an Australian newspaper sensationalized sex offenders, Ducat et al. (2009) found that the most common tone used to draw the attention of readers was dramatic and with highly sensational content. The second most popular tone used was that of shock, aimed at creating fear or anger for the audience. This seed of fear which journalists create through agenda-setting is nourished through the way the public talks about the news items; it changes from country to country depending on how aware the audience is aware of what is happening in the community (Huhn, Oettler, & Peetz, 2009).

Rodgers and Thorson (2001) conclude that in order to better understand the role of the media in modern society, critical attention needs to be placed on the content and effects of newspapers and other media. Goffman's (1974) media framing theory holds that mass media's role is not only to shape the discussion of its audience but to also force them to think in a particular way, sometimes even creating fear, which Huhn, Oettler, and Peetz (2009) argue distracts society from crisis and social change.

News is a social construction shaped by the activities of and interaction among journalists and consumers. It draws on the concepts of media logic and framing (Bullock, 2008).

The media must recognize that crime and violence is a public health issue which has been a part of our history and, to a large extent, our culture (Kirkhorn, 1996), and it should be discussed more as a social concern than as a way of making money.

Reporting a gruesome killing, bloody shooting, or similar violent crime has become a staple of the news media, whether it is via television, radio, newspaper, or an online medium. This practice has been shown to result in higher ratings for that particular medium (Zhang, Meadows, & Zhou, 2012). The more sensational the details, the better the chances that ratings will increase or newspapers will sell.

Sensational news coverage contradicts the professional role of the media to accurately inform the public about events that the public finds meaningful (Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). The pursuit of commercial interests seems to be what propels broadcasters to interest audiences through the sensationalizing or “tabloidizing” of the news (Zhang, et al., 2012; Vettehen et al., 2005). This practice, deeply rooted in journalistic standards, is in line with a decades-old mantra used mostly for television, “if it bleeds, it leads,” a phrase popularized by Eric Pooley in the *New York* magazine of 1989 (p. 37).

History of Sensationalism

Sensationalism, with its roots grounded in early nineteenth century journalism, is designed to stimulate strong response based on amplification of the details by the media as well as uninhibited details of news items (Grabe, Zhous, & Barnett, 2001.) As a result, news audiences become highly interested in the details which are responsible for the emotional arousal experienced by listeners or readers of the news (Kononova, Bailey, Bolls, Yegiyani, & Jeong, 2009).

According to Grabe, Zhous, and Barnett (2001), sensationalism is designed to stimulate intense reaction based on exaggeration and uninhibited details of news stories presented by the media. The main idea behind sensational news is that they are capable of provoking attention and/or responses in the audience (Grabe et al., 2001; Vettehen et al., 2005). There is a tendency for tabloid news topics to replace substantive information with socially significant stories and flashy production styles (Bek, 2004; Grabe et al., 2001; Wang & Cohen, 2009).

Grabe et al. (2001) argue that there are two ways in which news sensationalism can be effective: through content and through analysis of the structural features of the kinds of news being written. In other words, politics, economics, health, and education were not considered as sensational as other news such as crimes, sex, and scandals (Kononova et al., 2009). Likewise,

Wang (2012) believes that as it relates to official news content, a sensational story is one which deals with crimes, accidents, disasters, sex, terrorism, war, violence, conflict, public fears, or human interest. He further argues that sensational news also has formal characteristics that are linked to sensory stimulation, including pictorial or graphic representation, animated representation, background music, slow motion, speed-up motion, visual repetition, gory visuals, soft focus, color change, digitization, distorted human voices, and extreme emotion. This is more the case with television news or online news features. Additionally, for news actors, sensational news stories focus on private citizens or celebrities who personalize or dramatize news stories, rather than allowing officials or more authoritative sources to justify the stories (Wang, 2012).

Before the 1980s, sensationalism in news was mostly considered with regard to story content or subject matter (Wang, 2012). It focused on news coverage of “crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents, and fires, along with amusing, heartwarming, shocking, or curious vignettes about people in the area” (Adams, 1978, p. 691). Since then, news items that discuss celebrities, crime, sex, disasters, accidents, and public fears have been constantly labeled as sensational (Ehrlich, 1996; Hofstetter & Dozier, 1986; Knight, 1989). During its early phase, sensationalizing of news was viewed with contempt because of its ability to draw attention and stir emotions (David & McLeod, 2003).

Yellow Journalism

In newspapers, sensational news content tends to be appealing, frivolous, and insignificant (Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009). This style of news writing and presentation has existed for centuries and is believed to have emerged during the Penny Press in the early 19th century (Davis & McLeod, 2003; Grabe et al., 2003; Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009). The explicit coverage of crimes in the 19th century exaggerated the framing theory, giving credence

to the legacy of yellow journalism and its capability to hold the audience's attention (Hunt, 2014).

Yellow journalism, which started due to extreme competition among rival newspapers just prior to the start of the twentieth century, is described as partial reporting, camouflaged as truth. In other words, a factual story is presented in a misleading or "sensational" manner so as to create fear, hatred, doubt, or even compassion in the audience (Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009).

According to Hunt (2014), yellow journalism was irresponsible, belligerent, and offensive. Simultaneously, it encouraged the transformation of graphic and design as well as fact-finding and creativity in reporting. Additionally, yellow journalism promoted partiality of reporters to self-promotion and attacks on other newspapers (Hunt, 2014). Because of this, Hunt (2014) claims that yellow journalism is not wholly a bad thing, but media have created in the public a negative view because of the willful and unprofessional reporting practices and the relentless number of journalists and media that are willing to do anything to ensure that their audiences take notice (Hunt, 2014).

Increasing Sales and Market Value

According to Hunt (2014), the main reason for the use of sensational reporting was to increase sales and/or viewership and gain more market share. The media's practice of the past to include sensational elements in its news can be attributed to origins of media economics and public popularity (Zhang et al., 2012).

Although people generally regard this type of reporting as unprofessional and a breach of journalistic ethics, it emerges repeatedly today with the best example being tabloids (Hunt, 2014). Additionally, competition among news sources have caused an increase in sensationalism, a practice which Wang (2012) claims is prevalent among less professional journalists. It is this

progressively intense battle in the media market which has caused tabloids to use sensationalism as a way to entice and subsequently retain audience devotion to reading the news (Zhang et al., 2012).

Those in the television industry have been known to succumb to the temptation to show shocking images, (while newspapers have printed graphic images) as a way to improve profits, a move that has been known to affect the quality of news/information which is broadcasted or printed (Zhang et al., 2012). Although Wang (2012) attributes sensationalism to market-driven forces (particularly as it relates to television), the practice is responsible for the reduction in credibility and integrity in American media. More empirical research on an international scale is needed (Wang, 2012).

In an early study, Caldwell (1932) found that crime and other sensational news had increased by over one-half in space, due mainly to what he calls “industrialization” and the fact that modern metropolitan newspapers were commercialized and sought profits. These earnings were acquired through the sale of as much advertising space as possible, in many cases up to 50% or more. The newspaper was made appealing through the enlargement and enhancement of the general body of the paper with crime and other sensational news, with the aim of enticing and seducing its readers (Caldwell, 1932). While this study may be dated, it can be said that many of Caldwell’s findings still hold true for today’s media.

Online Sensationalism and Photographs

Photographs also play an important role in sensationalizing of news (Zhang et al., 2012). The media have continued to show violent images in order to attract viewers. Newton (2001) noted that readers and viewers remember pictures more than words and subsequently are drawn to a news story because of the pictures. Both the sensational writing and photographs are responsible for increasing audience attention to news. According to Zhang, Meadows, and Zhou

(2012), sensational photographs are responsible for provoking increased excitement in its readers more so than unbiased pictures. Additionally, it was found that when prompted, individuals were better able to remember stories with a sensational writing style than one that embodied a neutral writing style (Zhang et al., 2012).

Unlike television news, two of the key components that are frequently found in online news are digital texts and pictures. Knobloch, Hastall, Zillmann, and Callison (2003) found that adding intimidating photographs to an online news headline has the ability to create a greater emotional response from an audience. Wise, Bolls, and Schaefer (2008) found that negative pictures and headlines in a news website are able to increase an audience's interest in that topic or story since the photographs are seen as impending danger. This justification is in line with Lang's (2006) aversive system theory which argues that negative pictures increase the way an audience understands and analyses a news item. Because most of the facts of a story can be found in the text itself, pictures and videos play a critical role in underscoring the central points of a news item as it relates to news on the Internet (Zhang et al., 2012). This suggests a need for future research to investigate the role that sensationalism plays in how an audience processes text online.

Online news is a shared amalgamation of audio, video, and text, which is the major difference from the traditional broadcast news (Kononova et al., 2009). This difference in data presentation may affect how readers pay attention and remember the information (Kononova et al., 2009). While individuals may not read the whole story online, they read a good portion, even when modalities, (i.e., video, text, and photographs) are used. This is why Wise et al. (2008) argue that reading of the news text is a vital part of online news processing, and requires the use of more of an audience's mental ability.

What Makes News Worthy of Sensationalizing

There are several components of newsworthiness that vary by country and news organization. Because it is easy to acquire information about crime and violence from the police through press releases or statistical information, many newscasts and print media are filled with information on death and destruction, as opposed to human interest stories (Zhang et al., 2012). Additionally, stories of crime in general are cost-effective, in that they do not cost much to cover. Adding to the sensationalism is the ability for print media to use gaudy pictures to accompany their already biased stories, which sometimes distracts from the written news since the audience attention is first focused on the picture (Zhang et al., 2012).

According to Graber (1989), two of the major factors that determine how media present news are proximity (how close the story is happening) and sensationalism, (how much violence, drama, and scandals). Alternatively, Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) state that the level of social significance and intensity of deviance (how much it contradicts social norms) are the two main predictors of newsworthiness. News can be politically, culturally, economically, or publicly significant. Kononova et al. (2009) describe social significance as how relevant a topic or issue is to a particular system of government, because for the most part people are more riveted by events that are close to home or to which they are able to relate. Public significance is determined by whether an issue threatens or will improve the community's life (Kononova et al., 2009). But even if certain issues or events are deemed newsworthy, they should not be distasteful or repulsive to the audience (Zhang et al., 2012).

Natural catastrophes and accidents are among some of the undesirable events that increase news impact on the community (Kononova et al., 2009), which Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) refer to as statistical deviance because these events are not daily occurrences. It is said

that these types of news tend to appeal to certain audiences and especially media watchdogs so long as the issues are sensational and close to home (Kononova et al., 2009). Duwe (2000) posits that the news media exemplify violent, personal crimes because of their tragedy, drama, and rarity, so that crime news is more appealing and entertaining to its audience.

“Regular” crime stories are not given much publicity, because topics that are covered extensively by the media are more likely to have an effect on the public’s opinions and how some social-policy decisions are made (Duwe, 2000). The prevalence of sensational news may encompass place and time (Davis & McLeod, 2003), even though there is a distinct difference in worldwide media cultures, structures, and standards (Wang, 2012). According to Curran, Iyengar, Lund, and Salovaara-Moring (2009) differences can be distinguished in three ways: an original public service model, where programming beliefs dominate; a dual system combining commercial media with strong public service organizations; and the market model of the US.

Because of the deregulation of broadcasting systems in the United States, Canada, and some European and Asian countries, Wang (2012) claims that news items which interest the audience’s predispositions combined with the media’s use of sensational techniques, might similarly affect audiences around the world.

Latin American Media

In the past, scholars have argued that Latin America’s media systems were just a reproduction of news from the US and Western Europe (Catalan & Sunkel, 1992; Colomina, 1968; Mattelart, 1972). The last two decades have witnessed growth and development of media systems in the region, which Lugo (2008) claims requires a more individual investigation, one that specifically focuses on Latin America’s distinct media systems and their relation to global trends. Media in Latin America are known to be exploited by the private sector and are agents for political and societal control (Lugo, 2008).

While the US and Great Britain saw the rise of the Penny Press up until the first half of the twentieth century (McNair, 2003), Latin America's media system was characterized by limited reach and heavy censorship (Rockwell & Janus, 2003). Except for just a small number of exceptions, those totalitarian and discriminatory countries which took power throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were conscious to create media structures that disallowed access to the general public in order to safeguard their roles as instruments of control (Lugo, 2008). That situation is no longer the same, because technology has transformed the media in many ways (Lugo, 2008).

As with the media in the US and UK, Lugo (2008) argues that, in general, Latin American media has progressively adopted a cultured system of control that is more focused on satisfying market needs, adding that Latin American media are now less politicized within the moral framework of liberal democracies in the region (Lugo, 2008). There is also an admission that several of the authoritarian components of the dictatorship period remain in place or have transformed to a more elusive means of suppression and control, which Lugo (2008) describes as having some political consequences.

Research Questions

The notion that media have a role in shaping discussion is important for the field of journalism and communication. News media can either be a part of the solution, or as McDermott (1982) explains, a part of the problem. Past research has shown that the way the media "frames" a story influences what is discussed in the public arena as well as how these discussions occur (Goffman, 1974). This is essential for public discourse and highlights the serious role that the media play in shaping thought and even feelings among its audience members.

It is therefore important for the media to remain conscious of their social responsibility to small countries like Belize, especially among young people involved in criminal and gang activities. *The Reporter* and the *Amandala* newspapers were selected as the main resources for the headlines/front-page stories to be analyzed because the two newspapers are considered in Belizean circles as the most “neutral” in its news content, as well as are the most-circulated among newspapers in Belize.

The study is aimed at finding out to what extent the two most read newspapers in Belize, *The Reporter* and the *Amandala*, sensationalize crime stories, and whether there are more violent crime stories used as headlines than there are other public affairs and human interest stories. It will also reveal whether one newspaper is more sensational than the other, as well the types of pictures which accompany sensationalism news stories.

The current study examines headlines from both printed newspapers in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do Belize’s two most-read newspapers, *The Reporter* and *Amandala* compare with regard to sensational news coverage of crime?

It is easy for the media to get information about crime and violence from the police department via press releases or statistical information which is readily available for public consumption. Electronic and print media contain a lot of information on death and destruction, as opposed to human interest stories (Zhang et al., 2012). If we can compare these two newspapers, it will provide important information for future research in regards to commonality of the types of stories the print media in Belize use as headlines.

RQ 2: Are story topics reported as headlines more likely to concern government, community affairs, sensationalism, or human-interest news?

Intimately related to RQ2, the answer to this question will reveal any similarities between Belize print media and those in the US and the UK.

RQ 3: Do crime stories have more emotional tone when compared to government, community affairs, or human interest stories?

Sensational stories are known to create emotions within their audiences and more often than not, are written with emotional overtones (David & McLeod, 2003). However, other stories on “government” or “public affairs” may or may not have an emotional tone. This particular question could reveal the way these types of stories are written and appear in the two news organizations analyzed. A relevant element in this research, this question will examine the tone used in sample headlines, the details of which could form the basis for future studies on this subject beyond Belize.

RQ 4: What types of images are used in stories that are found to be sensational?

Audiences remember pictures more than words and subsequently are drawn to a news story because of the pictures (Newton, 2001). While this research does not employ a survey to readers of these newspapers to confirm if this is true for Belize, the information discovered from this question will establish the type of pictures used for future studies to explore the question of their effects.

RQ 5: Are there any differences in the size of front page headlines for *The Reporter* and *Amandala* newspapers?

The amount of space used for a story is part of the format, and the results gathered from this question will provide noteworthy information on differences between formats for both newspapers.

Method

Sample

This study examined a random sample of two weekly newspapers from Belize (one per month for each of the two papers) over a five-year period from 2010-2014, for a total of 120 editions of these newspapers. It included the *Amandala* newspaper (60 editions) and *The Reporter* newspaper (60 editions) from four weekly and 12 monthly periods: from the first week of January to December 2000 (*Amandala*); the second week of January to December 2000 (*The Reporter*); the third week of January to December 2001 (*Amandala*); the fourth week of 2001 (*The Reporter*); the first week of January to December 2002 (*The Reporter*); the second week of January to December 2002 (*Amandala*); the third week of January to December 2003 (*The Reporter*); the fourth week of January to December 2003 (*Amandala*); first week of January to June 2004 and third week of July to December 2004 (*Amandala*); and second week of January to June 2004 and fourth week of July to December 2004 (*The Reporter*).

Both *Amandala* and *The Reporter* are considered the most neutral newspapers when compared with other papers with national circulation in Belize, and are believed to be the most-read in Belize. Although *Amandala* has a Tuesday edition which it publishes weekly, this study only examines Friday publications for both papers. (A number of the Tuesday stories are reproduced in the Friday edition).

Content analysis was employed to assess the attributes of sensationalism in newspapers' headlines. Previous experimental study has shown that these encompass elements that produce emotions in audiences. Different types of news headlines were compared in order to identify the

existence of these sensational elements. The overriding category of “sensational” news included stories about sports, crime, entertainment/showbiz, and human interest. All the other topics were included under “non-sensational” news stories (Ryu, 1982; Slattery et al., 2001).

Quantitative Analysis

This study determined to what extent the two most read newspapers in Belize, *The Reporter* and *Amandala*, sensationalize crime stories, and whether there were more violent crime stories as headlines than other public affairs and human interest stories. It also reported whether one newspaper was more sensational than the other, as well what types of pictures were used in sensational news stories/headlines.

The focus was on narratives, which, as Fisher (1984) explains with regard to news stories, do not have to be balanced, realistic, or factual to be worthy of acceptance or reading by the public. Fisher (1984) describes narrative as a principle of significant events, using words or deeds so as to create meaning for those who live, make, or decipher them. This idea forms the basis for his (1984) explanation as to why news stories come to represent persuasive valid reasons for action or belief by their audiences.

Format. Coding was done based on structural elements such as amount of space, color, number of people shown, and subject matter. Additionally, the subjective content-related theme of emotional tone was used and analyzed. Paragraphs were used as the unit of analysis, and the number of individuals in the photos was coded, as opposed to the presence or absence of a photo.

Coding for format. For each story, coders selected the best category in which to place headlines. The classifications were as follows:

Size

- Full page
- More than half
- Half page
- between ¼ and ½ page

Graphic

- photograph
- cartoon
- painting/sketch
- other (describe) _____

Text/Graphic

- text only
- graphic only
- both
- quarter page or less

Color

- Black and white
- grayscale
- 2 toned
- 3 or more colors

Operational definition of sensationalism. Adams (1978) defined “sensationalism” as human interest stories which spark emotion in the audience. He described the content category of sensationalism and human interest news as accounts of "crime, violence, natural disasters, accidents and fires, along with amusing, heart-warming, shocking, or curious (articles) about people in the area" (p. 691). Previous research on sensationalism has focused, for the most part, on television news and, in some instances, on “tabloid” news and less on what we know today as journalism. A number of definitions have been used in the past including the use of dramatic elements (Graber, 1994); tabloidization (Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000) and human interest (Slattery & Hakanen, 1994). While the concept of sensationalism can be divided into three categories, which can be used by journalists in order to attract an audience’s attention, for this study, we will focus on just one aspect, i.e., dramatic elements (story content) as conceived by Adams (1978), and Slattery and Hakanen (1994). As a subset of content, and as postulated by Grabe et al. (2000), the form of a message can also attract the attention of the audience. Therefore, along with story content, the element of “format” of story headlines such as space, size, and the use of pictures, is also used.

Coding for content. Categories were created for news stories, and a list of main themes was developed and given operational definitions that were clear and specific. A check was made to ensure that categories did not overlap (mutually exclusive) and that categories met all the possibilities as defined by Adams (1978) and Slattery (1992). Stories were coded in the following categories:

1. **Government:** actions of government entities and actors, elections, public economics, government actions (public education, government reports, and courts)
2. **Community affairs:** non-governmental public affairs, private economics, medical and health (non-governmental, health-related stories), and self-help and community-related activities (private education, environment/science, relation, and civic organizations).
3. **Sensationalism:** unwholesome emotional responses in the average audience member. Predominantly about violence and crime, accidents, disasters, sex, noncriminal misconduct, suicide, scandal, and outrageous behavior.
4. **Human interest:** stories that might evoke benign emotional responses: kindness, generosity, noteworthiness, pathos, or the humorous, novel and/or heartwarming.

In order to rate “tone” of stories, as described by Slattery, Doremis and Marcus (2001), a 1-3 scale was employed, with 1 being very emotional, 2 being somewhat emotional, and 3 being not emotional.

I trained a voluntary outside coder to code. To confirm inter-coder reliability, 10% of the data were independently coded, resulting in an average of 90% (.90) agreement based on the Scott’s Pi reliability test. After achieving acceptable reliability, the remaining stories were coded. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to test to determine significant

relationships. Chi-Square tests, *t*-tests, and descriptive statistics were used to determine significant relationships and differences between variables.

Results

RQ 1: How do Belize's two most-read newspapers, *Amandala* and *The Reporter* compare with regard to sensational news coverage of crime?

Amandala was significantly more likely to publish sensational stories than *The Reporter* ($\chi^2 = 41.327, p = .000$). Of the 31 stories categorized as sensational in *Amandala*, 25 of them (80.6%) were about crime, the majority of which were violent crimes ranging from armed robbery, shootings, stabbings, murder, burglary, arson, and unnatural crime. In 2010, there were five crime stories used as headlines, eight in 2011, seven in 2012, none in 2013, and six in 2014. While these numbers are not outstanding when compared to the overall number of stories from both newspapers, it is a significant number when compared to *The Reporter* newspaper because it represents more than twice the number of crime headlines as reported in *The Reporter*. For example, of the 16 stories categorized as sensational in *The Reporter*, 12 of them (75%) were about crime, ranging from a botched bank robbery to murders, burglary and theft, shooting, and a contraband bust. This represents only 20% of the random sample from *The Reporter*, or an overall total of a meager 10% of the 120 combined. Three of those stories were printed in 2010; two in 2011; five in 2012; one in 2013; and none in 2014. From this we could report that *Amandala* is twice as likely to contain violent crime news in headlines when compared to *The Reporter*.

RQ 2: Are story topics reported as headlines more likely to concern government, community affairs, sensationalism, or human-interest news?

Using Chi Square, I checked on the last variable named “Category” or “Story Type” and found that there were significant differences regarding category 1 (Government) and category 3 (Sensational).

The story type or category was divided into four groups: government, community affairs, sensational, and human interest. Overall, community affairs and sensationalism were almost evenly divided, separated by only one story (see Table 1); 31 from the *Amandala*, representing more than half of its sample and 16 from the *Reporter*, representing 13.3% of that paper’s sample. Overall, there were 15 more, or 25% more sensational stories in the *Amandala* than there were in the *Reporter* newspaper (see Appendix 6).

Table 1

Story Type/Category

Topic	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Government	19	15.8	15.8
Community Affairs	51	42.5	58.3
Sensationalism	50	41.7	100
Human Interest	0	0	100

However, individually, *The Reporter* had more government stories than sensational stories. Government stories in *The Reporter* represented 43.3% of that paper’s sample, compared to *Amandala*’s 9.2%. That shows a difference of 12 stories or 20% between the two newspapers (see Appendix 6).

Table 2

Story Type/Tone

Frequencies			
Topic	The Reporter	Amandala	Total
Government	3	16	19
Community Affairs	23	28	51
Sensationalism	34	16	50
Human Interest	0	0	50

After sensational and government stories, community affairs made up the next greatest number with 26 of the 120-total sample (21.7%), not a significant difference between the two newspapers as the *Amandala* had a total of 11 or 9.2% while the *Reporter* had 15 or 12.5%. Overall, this total represented 25% of *The Reporter's* 60-stories sample and 18.3% of the *Amandala's*. When compared to the *Amandala*, *The Reporter* had 4% more “community affairs” stories (see Appendix 6).

Human interest stories were the least represented overall in each of the two newspapers sampled. Only 5.8% of the 120 stories were human interest, i.e., four from *Amandala* and three from *The Reporter* (see Appendix 6). We could therefore conclude that *The Reporter* was more likely to have government stories, while *Amandala* was more likely to have sensational stories as headlines. The minority of stories in both papers were human interest stories with not much difference between *Amandala* and *The Reporter* newspapers. This does not support previous research.

A Mann-Whitney test was performed to determine significant differences between the two newspapers relating to size. *Amandala* and *The Reporter* differed significantly regarding size ($U = 1200.5, p = .001$). *Amandala* used up more space for its headlines. In some cases, the headlines accounted for about one-quarter of the entire page.

RQ 3: Do crime stories have more emotional tone when compared to government, community affairs or human interest stories?

A Chi-Square test was used to determine whether crime stories differed regarding emotional tone. They differed significantly ($\chi^2 = 1.586, df = 2, p = .000$). *Amandala* had more stories about government, but *The Reporter* had more sensational stories. For example, 26.7% of all *Amandala*'s stories, representing 13.3% or 16 of the 120 total sample, were considered to be very emotional in tone, compared to just three articles, or 2.5% of the overall sample in *The Reporter*, a difference of 21.7% more in *Amandala* (see Appendix 5).

There was a minimal difference of 5 (8.3%) in the "somewhat emotional" stories between the two newspapers, with *Amandala* accounting for 28 (23.3%) of the 120; and *The Reporter* having 23 (19.2%) of the total. Overall, "somewhat emotional" stories made up the majority of the sample stories with a total of 51 (42.5%) (see Appendix 5).

The largest difference was seen in the "not emotional" category, where more than half of *The Reporter* stories were found to be "not emotional," with 34 stories (56.7%), representing 28.3% of the total 120 articles. This is 30% more (18 stories) than the number in *Amandala*, which totals 16 or 13.3% of the 120 sample (see Appendix 5). We can therefore conclude that *The Reporter* is more likely than *Amandala* to print stories with an unemotional tone ($\chi^2 = 1.586, df = 2, p = .000$).

The Reporter and *Amandala* newspapers differed significantly in the tone they used in their front page headlines and stories. For example, 26.7% of all *Amandala*'s stories, representing 13.3% or 16 of the 120 total sample, were considered to be very emotional in tone, compared to just three articles, or 2.5% of the overall sample in *The Reporter*, a difference of 21.7% more in *Amandala*.

There was no significant difference between the two newspapers. There was only a difference of 5 or 8.3% in the "somewhat emotional" stories between the two newspapers, with *Amandala* accounting for 28 or 23.3% of the 120; and *The Reporter* having 23 or 19.2% of the total. Overall, "somewhat emotional" stories made up the majority of the sample stories with a total of 51 or 42.5%.

The largest difference was seen in the "not emotional" category, where more than half of *The Reporter* samples were labeled "not emotional," i.e., 34 stories or 56.7%, representing 28.3% of the total 120 articles. This is 30% more (18 stories) than the number in *Amandala*, which totals 16 or 13.3% of the 120 sample. This leads to the conclusion that *The Reporter* is significantly more likely than *Amandala* to print stories with non-emotional tone ($\chi^2 = 15.865$, $df = 2$, $p = .000$).

RQ 4: What types of images are used in stories that are found to be sensational?

Using a *t*-test, I checked to see if the newspapers differed regarding the number of people shown. They did not differ significantly ($t = -.028$, $p = .978$).

Overall, 84.2% or 101 stories in both papers included images with at least one or more persons. There were only 19 stories or 15.8% of the overall sample which did not have an image of a person in it. That's five from *Amandala* and 14 from *The Reporter*, a difference of 15% between the two newspapers.

While images seem to be an important element of the front page stories of each newspaper, there were no significant differences in the number of individuals that each newspaper used in the headlines for each of its 60 samples. Most of the images in both papers were with 1 person (51 of 120), although when compared with the overall sample, *Amandala* had 32 or 26%, while *The Reporter* had 19 images of one person. This is a difference of 9 or 15% between the two papers, but an overall total of 42.5%.

Stories with two persons accounted for an overall total of 16.7%, while 12 stories of the 120 sample had three persons in them.

There were twice as many stories that had five or more persons in them in than there were those with four persons, i.e., 12 to 6 respectively, totaling 5% and 10% of the overall 120-story sample; with *The Reporter* accounting for 6.7% more than *Amandala*.

There were a total of 47 stories – 31 from the *Amandala* and 16 from *The Reporter* (39.2%) – which were coded as “sensational.” Of that number, more than half, i.e., 26 (55.3%) included a picture with one person; 6 (12.8%) had two persons; 4 (8.5%) had three persons; there was one story (2.1%) with a picture of four persons; and two stories (4.3%) that had five or more people in it. Interestingly, eight of the 47 (17%) did not have a photo.

Ultimately, it is clear that both newspapers are likely to use a picture of just one person in headlines that are deemed to be sensational. It is unlikely that there will be stories without individuals in it or images with five or more people. There are no significant differences in the use of images of individuals by either newspaper.

However, as shown in Table 3, there is a significant difference as it relates to the color of these images. *The Reporter* uses color images, while the *Amandala* uses black and white images in all of their front-page headlines. Table 3 explains the findings of a Chi-Square Test.

Table 3

Frequencies of Chi-Square Test

Graphic

	Observed <i>N</i>	Expected <i>N</i>	Residual
1	47	24.5	22.5
4	2	24.5	-22.5
Total	49		

Test Statistics

	Graphic
Chi-Square	41.327 ^a
Df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.000

RQ 5: Are there any differences in the size of front page headlines for *The Reporter* and *Amandala* newspapers?

I used a Mann-Whitney test to see if there were differences between *The Reporter* (1) and *Amandala* (2) regarding size (see Table 4). *Amandala* and *The Reporter* differed significantly regarding size ($U = 1200.5$, $Z = -3.256$, $p = .001$).” The *Amandala* used up more space than *The Reporter* did.

Table 4

Mann-Whitney Test

Ranks

Newspaper		<i>N</i>	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Size	1	60	50.51	3030.50
	2	60	70.49	4229.50
	Total	120		

Test Statistics^a

	Size
Mann-Whitney U	1200.500
Wilcoxon W	3030.500
Z	-3.256
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.001

a. Grouping Variable: Newspaper

Both *Amandala* and *The Reporter* newspapers are published on the standard tabloid paper size (11 by 17 inches) and are available on Friday morning of each week. *Amandala* also publishes a weekly Tuesday edition; however, this study only looked at the Friday weekly for both papers.

As it relates to the size of stories in this particular study, 28 of the 120 stories (23.3%) used in our sample take up one fourth page or less, with *The Reporter* accounting for a total of 20

and the remaining 8 for *Amandala*, a difference of 12 stories (20%). In the one fourth page to one half page category, 11 of the 60 news stories (13.3%) are from *Amandala*, with 16 of the 60 from *The Reporter* samples, (26.7%). Combined, they represent 27 of the 120 sample (22.5%), with *The Reporter* having five more stories (8.3%) of its articles in this category (see Appendix 1).

News stories that take up approximately half of the front page totaled 37 of the 120 sample (30.8%), a majority when compared to other categories. Of that 37, *The Reporter* had 15 (12.5%), while *Amandala* had 22 (18.3%), a difference of seven overall (11.7%) more by *Amandala* (see Appendix 1).

Articles that accounted for more than half of the front page in both newspapers totaled 28 (23.3%); 19 of those (15.8%) came from *Amandala* while 9 or 7.5% were from *The Reporter*. This represents a difference of about 10 (16.7%) of *Amandala* stories over those in *The Reporter*. There were no full-page stories in either newspaper (see Appendix 1).

It is likely that headlines stories will use up at least half page of the front page of *Amandala* and *The Reporter*, while neither newspaper is likely to use the entire page for its headline front-page story. Outside of that, it is more likely that *The Reporter* will use one fourth of its front page for headlines, while *Amandala* will use more than half of the front page (see Appendix 1).

In the entire 120-sample we used for analysis, both *Amandala* and *The Reporter* newspapers used photographs in their front page articles for 100% of their stories. There were no cartoons, painting, sketches, or illustrations used in any of the periodicals. Suffice to say *Amandala* and *The Reporter* newspapers were most likely to use pictures and not paintings, illustrations, sketches, or cartoons for their front-page and headline stories (see Appendix 2).

Additionally, evidence showed that *The Reporter* was more likely to print its front page articles in color, as opposed to *Amandala*, whose articles were solely in black and white. All 60 samples (100%) from *The Reporter* were in three or more colors, while all 60 samples, (100%) of *Amandala* stories were in black and white (see Appendix 3).

Overall, there were 101 stories (84.2%) in both papers that included images with at least one or more persons. There were only 19 stories (15.8%) of the overall sample which did not have an image of a person in it. That's five from *Amandala* and 14 from *The Reporter*, a difference of 15% between the two newspapers (see Appendix 4).

Conclusion/Discussion

The media have always had influence on their audiences whether it is the listening, viewing, or reading public, especially those who are not privy to other means of information. When this happens, the effects of sensationalism can be far reaching. We have seen where media organizations have varying objectives, one of which is to make money (Cojacariu, 2013), from which we can conclude that sensationalism will remain an important means of engaging an audience and increasing sales and ratings (Zhang et al., 2012). While news content might be affected by a news organization's modus operandi (Zhang et al., 2012), manipulating its contents is a direct attempt at influencing the audience's emotions through sensationalism (Cojacariu, 2013).

The main feature of communication, according to McQuail (1999) is influence. As it relates to the media, this sensationalism is used to influence the emotions of listeners to a specific state of "being." Funkhouser (1973) argues that there are quite a few instruments which the media use to influence attention for a certain news article, one of which is the over-reporting of important but unusual news. While some topics are critical, there are instances where the

media amplify their reporting because of the infrequency of that particular issue being reported to the listening or reading public (Funkhouser, 1973).

Crime stories seem to be the most exciting and appear to present the highest motivation, particularly for journalists, and subsequently a higher sensational value. Compared to “neutral” topics, these are the kinds of news that audiences recognize as intense and for which there is a higher emotional response (Zhang et al., 2012). While the way a story is written contributes to an audience’s reaction to that story, photographs also add to the sensationalism and results in greater recall of particular news item (Zhang et al., 2012). This holds true chiefly because the most dangerous and least seldom occurring crimes such as murder, robbery, and assault are most frequently conveyed, while white-collar crimes are not reported as often (Graber, 1980).

Despite media’s attempt at controlling their audiences through sensationalizing news, the tactic is not as effective when other sources of information are available. That includes knowing the family member of someone who has been accused of a crime, or the accused person himself, or having been a victim of a crime or knowing someone who was/is (Duwe, 2000).

In the past the public depended heavily on the news media for information about crime and other topics because they served as the primary sources of information (Graber, 1980). A historical example would be *War of the Worlds* broadcasted in 1938, where the public was influenced in a way that would be unimaginable today (Cojocariu, 2013). The same cannot be said for the media now, since there are multiple sources for consumption of the news (Duwe, 2000).

This holds true especially when one considers the media “environment,” as posited by Wang (2012) who argues that even though there are countries under the same media system that share common elements, each culture or people may still exemplify certain features. Kononova

et al. (2009) note that the effects of tabloids on the way an audience is drawn to a particular story or processes information has a great deal to do with how the story is sensationalized. Ethical issues are worth considering when we discuss media sensationalism of news (Zhang et al., 2012). This is particularly important since the media often claim that the public has a right to know, on the grounds of “free press,” and that their role is to ensure that the information is provided (Zhang et al., 2012).

Belize’s media in general, particularly television stations, are known to use graphic images to sensationalize their stories, and are famous for promoting crime stories at the beginning and during the entire newscast, so as to keep the audience listening/looking until the end of the coverage. Radio, on the other hand, does not have the privilege of images, so would use certain descriptive adjectives in order to catch the attention and create emotion in its audience. Newspapers use bold text as headlines to grab the attention of its readers, and similarly stir emotional reactions in them. These are all tactics that seem to boost listenership and sales of news stories, one of the practices of tabloid media in the United States. Wang (2012) attributes this to competition among media houses, an important element in Belize, especially considering the limited market share which the news media have as it relates to the advertising dollars. This is in line with Lugo’s (2008) argument that, for the most part, as with the media in the US and UK, Latin American media has gradually assumed a cultured system of control that is more focused on sustaining market needs.

Limitations and Future Research

While this research provides ground-breaking information regarding sensationalism in Belize’s newspapers, one of the main limitations is the sample size of the articles used in this study. A larger sample may or may not have revealed important information on the prevalence of

sensationalism in *The Reporter* and *Amandala* newspapers. For future research, more samples should be included to give a broader picture of the reality of sensationalism in Belize's two most-read newspapers.

Additionally, the fact that 2012 was an election year in Belize may have also contributed to the number of "government" stories that were found in both papers. This could have affected the results of the story "categories." For future research, a comparison of stories in elections years could be made so that any differences or trends in reporting could be highlighted. This could include the two most-read "political" newspapers in Belize, *The Guardian* and the *Belize Times*; future research could also provide an element of comparison on similarities and differences when compared with "neutral newspapers."

Future research could also employ additional methods such as focus groups and/or surveys of the newspaper's audience to provide vital information on how the public views sensationalism in Belize and among its media in general. In line with this suggestion, future studies could also look at television media to compare whether there are any similarities with the US or the UK. Belize is a former British colony, and a country that could easily be influenced by the US and its media.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

SIZE	Amandala (A)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	Reporter (R)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	OVERALL TOTAL STORIES	OVERALL PERCENT %	Diff R v. A	% R v. A
1/4 Page or less	8	13.3%	6.7%	20	33.3%	16.7%	28	23.3%	+12	+20%
¼ to ½	11	18.3%	9.2%	16	26.7%	13.3%	27	22.5%	+5	+8.3%
½ Page	22	36.7%	18.3%	15	25%	12.5%	37	30.8%	-7	- 11.7%
More than ½ Page	19	31.7%	15.8%	9	15%	7.5%	28	23.3%	-10	- 16.7%
Full Page	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0	0%
TOTAL	60	100%	50%	60	100%	50%	120	100%		

Appendix 2

GRAPHIC	Amandala Newspaper (A)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	Reporter Newspaper (R)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	OVERALL TOTAL STORIES	OVERALL PERCENT %	Diff R v. A	% R v. A
Photograph	60	100%	50%	60	50%	50%	120	100%	0	0%
Cartoon	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Painting/ Sketch/ Illustration	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Other	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0	0%
TOTAL	60	100%	50%	60	100%	50%	120	100%		0%

Appendix 3

COLOR	Amandala Newspaper (A)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	Reporter Newspaper (R)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	OVERALL TOTAL STORIES	OVERALL PERCENT %	Diff R v. A	% R v. A
Black and White	60	100%	50%	0	0%	0%	60	50%	-100	-100%
Grayscale	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0	0%
2-Tone	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0%	0	0%	0	0%
3 or more	0	0%	0%	60	100%	50%	60	50%	100	100%
TOTAL	60	100%	50%	60	100%	50%	120	100%		

Appendix 4

PEOPLE	Amandala Newspaper (A)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	Reporter Newspaper (R)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	OVERALL TOTAL STORIES	OVERALL PERCENT %	Diff R v. A	% R v. A
None	5	8.3%	4.2%	14	23.3%	11.7%	19	15.8%	+9	+15%
1 person	32	53.3%	26.7%	19	31.7%	15.8%	51	42.5%	-13	-21.7%
2 persons	9	15%	7.5%	11	18.3%	9.2%	20	16.7%	+2	+3.3%
3 persons	8	13.3%	6.7%	4	6.7%	3.3%	12	10%	-4	-6.7%
4 persons	2	3.3%	1.7%	4	6.7%	3.3%	6	5%	+2	+3.3%
5 persons or more	4	6.7%	3.3%	8	13.3%	6.7%	12	10%	+4	+6.7%
TOTAL	60	100	50%	60	100	50%	120	100%		

Appendix 5

TONE	Amandala Newspaper (A)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	Reporter Newspaper (R)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	OVERALL TOTAL STORIES	OVERALL PERCENT %	Diff R v. A	% R v. A
Very Emotional	16	26.7%	13.3%	3	5.0%	2.5%	19	15.8%	-13	-21.7%
Somewhat Emotional	28	46.7%	23.3%	23	38.3%	19.2%	51	42.5%	-5	-8.3%
Not Emotional	16	26.7%	13.3%	34	56.7%	28.3%	50	41.7%	+18	+30%
TOTAL	60	100%	50%	60	100%	50%	120	100%		

Appendix 6

STORY TYPE	Amandala Newspaper (A)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	Reporter Newspaper (R)	% of 60 sample	% of 120 total	OVERALL TOTAL STORIES	OVERALL PERCENT %	Diff R v. A	% R v. A
Government	14	23.3%	11.7%	26	43.3%	21.7%	40	33.3%	+12	+20%
Community Affairs	11	18.3%	9.2%	15	25.0%	12.5%	26	21.7%	+4	+6.7%
Sensational	31	51.7%	25.8	16	26.7%	13.3%	47	39.2%	-15	-25%
Human Interest	4	6.7%	3.3	3	5%	2.5%	7	5.8%	-1	-1.7%
TOTAL	60	100%	50%	60	100%	50%	120	100%		