

Does it lead if it bleeds?
An analysis of Toronto newspapers
and their coverage of trauma-related events

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the ongoing perception of news media as an outlet that is fixated on sex, death and violence, through an analysis of three GTA newspapers. I argue that despite this consistent perception and the more recent push to online news media, trauma-related news stories do not dominate the news media landscape. A quantitative method was used to analyze the three newspapers to determine the actual percentage of trauma-related news stories in each of the newspapers and their online counterparts. Scholarship in the areas of news values, sensationalism and tabloidization, and the negativity bias also informed this thesis. The results of the research indicated that the percentage of trauma-related news stories was significantly lower than that of the percentage of overall news stories. However, secondary results indicate a difference in the types of trauma-related news stories between tabloid newspapers and broadsheet newspapers. The primary conclusion of this thesis is that the perception of news media needs to be reconsidered as the data does not support the existing perception.

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Chapter 1

On October 22, 2014, a gunman shot and killed a Canadian soldier standing guard outside the War Memorial near Parliament Hill and then entered the Parliament building intent on shooting others before being shot to death himself. The tragic events inside the building were caught on a smart phone by *Globe and Mail* journalist Josh Wingrove, whose startling footage was immediately uploaded to the reporter's website, *theglobeandmail.com*, as the events unfolded. Such dramatic images and sound would be sure to grab anyone's attention if he or she landed on the newspaper's website or later saw the reporter's video on local and national TV newscasts. A review of internet use on Google Trends suggests that there was a significant uptick in searches for both "Globe and Mail" and "theglobeandmail.com" during the end of the month of October 2014, which indicates that the site saw a rise in visitor traffic around the time that the story was posted.¹ While it cannot be determined with any certainty whether the reporter's dramatic footage actually caused this increase, given the important nature of the news story, the increase in online visits does suggest that when a story has highly dramatic elements, this might attract more users to online news sites. This is something that this thesis intends to explore.

Sensationalism, which is often conflated with dramatic news stories, and which is defined for the purpose of this thesis as "a tendency in the reporting of events to dramatize and exaggerate in order to attract attention and increase circulation or audience share" (Chandler and Munday, 2011), has a long history in the press, and in the 19th century, it had a name "yellow journalism." Then newspaper editors, especially in the United States, competed fiercely for subscribers by printing flamboyant, even downright false stories to grab the reader's attention. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, writing in their book *Elements of Journalism* (2007), described "yellow journalism" or the "yellow press" as focused on "sensational crime, scandal, thrill seeking and celebrity worship" (p. 38). Similarly, Mitchell Stephens in *A History of News* (1988) described the phenomenon as "what many would consider to be the absolute nadir of journalistic endeavour: sensationalism, yellow journalism, tabloid journalism. Some would not even glorify it with the appellation 'journalism'" (p. 113).

¹ Retrieved May 28, 2015 from Google Trends: www.google.ca/trends

In Canada, the term “yellow journalism” was not as prevalently used to describe such stories but that did not mean that sensationalistic tendencies common to that particular era of journalism did not appear in Canadian newspapers. In *A History of Journalism in Canada* (1984), Wilfred Kesterton noted that daily newspapers published in Canada between 1858 and 1900 engaged in "the practice of careless libel, of writing matters which would bring contempt of court conviction today and of commenting freely on questions which would immediately be classified as *sub judice*" (p. 47-48). In both Canada and the United States, those news stories were often rich in graphic detail and involved traumatic events such as murder or disasters, a descriptor that seems to apply equally to contemporary "breaking news" content.

While the age of 19th century “yellow journalism" may have passed, its influences can be seen in journalistic practice today, especially as the competitive demands of a 24-hour, digital news cycle push editors to emphasize colourful and graphic stories as a way to attract readers. Philosopher Alain De Botton described in *The News: A User's Manual* (2014) how some news organizations that are looking to increase their audience or subscriber numbers will resort to this new form of "yellow journalism":

Motivated by fears of intrusion, the more serious news organizations typically adopt a reserved tone in their reports [on disaster] ... They leave it to their less dignified colleagues, unfettered by scruples to evoke the truly vivid details of the latest outrages... Their reward for being willing to undertake such investigations is the occasionally guilty but concerted and lucrative interest of many millions of readers and viewers (p. 191).

Anne Jemphrey and Eileen Berrington described a similar phenomenon in their article “Surviving the Media: Hillsborough, Dunblane and the press” (2010) which focused on the 1989 Hillsborough disaster, an event that occurred at a soccer pitch and resulted in the deaths of 96 people. Although the Hillsborough incident took place during the earliest days of the 24-hour cable TV news cycle, the hallmarks of “yellow journalism” and “sensationalism” were still present. Jemphrey and Berrington noted that some tabloid newspapers published photos of the deceased before many of the victims’ families knew of their deaths. Though the name “yellow journalism” is not used to describe such sensational journalistic practice, these stories would not be that different from those found in the yellow papers of the 19th century.

Given the current transition to digital newsrooms with their 24-hour news cycles that eliminate the traditional newspaper and broadcast deadlines, this thesis questions whether digital editions contain a significant number of trauma-related stories that include sensationalistic

elements designed to attract reader attention and are posted on news websites while events still unfold. This thesis also explores whether there has been an increase in what may be considered sensational news content. In particular, it has a special focus on one specific type of sensational stories, those that involve trauma-related events, especially as digital editions vie for hits on their websites. In addition, the thesis compares the content of a newspaper's print and digital editions to determine if trauma-related stories (that may be considered sensational) appear more frequently on digital versus print editions.

Finally, this thesis explores whether a difference in sensational content exists in broadsheet versus tabloid newspapers. Henrik Örenbring and Anna Maria Jönsson in the introduction to their article “Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere” (2004) described the perceived difference this way: “tabloid journalism becomes everything which serious, responsible, good-quality journalism is not: sensationalist, over-simplified, populist, etc.” (p. 284). As this thesis compares the content of both types of newspapers, it hopes to determine if a tabloid newspaper contains more trauma-related news than its broadsheet counterparts and to determine if that difference is also reflected in their respective online editions. Notably, this thesis argues that all trauma-related stories, by their very nature, may be considered sensational because they concern matters of life and death or some of the tragic circumstance. This means they also inherently contain news values, making them attractive story choices for news organizations operating in any news platform.

In all, this thesis has two overarching objectives: First, it hopes to contribute to the larger body of work regarding the over-reliance on trauma-related stories in the news media, to attract more readers and possibly more sales. Thus, this thesis must assess whether a higher percentage of stories that are trauma-related exists, compared to the total number of news stories overall. Second, it should contribute to the field of Canadian journalism scholarship, which remains a largely untapped area of North American media research that tends to be heavily dominated by American studies on sensationalism and the news.

1.1 Defining Trauma

Because this thesis concerns an examination of newspaper print and online content, looking for stories that are trauma-related, it is worth defining the word "trauma." Searching the

term "trauma" on Google produces over one hundred million results.² This suggests that the term is both widely used and studied. Broadly speaking, trauma may be *physical*, namely "a wound, or external bodily injury in general" ("Trauma," Oxford English Dictionary). It can also have an *emotional* or *psychological* cause, such as "a deeply distressing or disturbing experience" or "emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may lead to long-term neurosis" ("Trauma," Oxford Dictionary). In a study like this of print and online news content, these definitions will aid in the identification of stories that may be categorized as trauma-related.

1.2 Sensationalism (and Trauma) Sells

Decades ago, in writing about local TV news, journalist Eric Pooley noted that local television newscasts focused on stories about violence because it appeared that these stories helped drive ratings higher. Pooley quoted a Boston news director who is to have said, "If it bleeds, it leads." Since the publication of Pooley's "Grins, Gore and Videotape" (1989) in *New York* magazine, the phrase has come to define a certain journalistic practice (in all news platforms) that favours the selection of sensational and trauma-related news stories that focus on natural or human-caused violence because they are perceived to attract more viewers, readers, and listeners. In *All the News That's Fit to Sell* (2004), James Hamilton described a similar phenomenon, writing "I find that across markets, crime coverage depends on audience interests" (p. 282); suggesting that if an audience is interested, more trauma-related news may be covered, to ensure continuing audience interest. If this is so, then a larger audience or readership makes a news organization more attractive to advertisers who will spend money, placing ads on either websites or newspapers.

In *A History of News* (1988), Stephens argued that sensationalism in the news began long before the 19th century. According to Stephens, news has always had sensationalistic elements, especially in the European news venues that were later imported into the Americas. He suggested that sensationalism and news are intrinsically linked in that sensationalism "appears to be a technique or style that is rooted somehow in the nature of the new. News obviously can do much more than merely sensationalize, but most news *is*, in an important sense, sensational: it is

² Retrieved May 26, 2015 from Google: www.google.ca

intended, in part, to arouse, to excite, often – whether the subject is a political scandal or a double murder – to shock” (p. 2).

Like Stephens, Roger Simpson and William Coté observed in *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting about Victims and Trauma* (2006) that there is “nothing is at all novel about modern culture’s addiction to violence and its fascination with victims. Tales of assaults, murders, rapes, robberies, earthquakes and floods appear in the earliest surviving publications” (p. 6). They suggested two causes behind this phenomenon, arguing that “readers and viewers all too often complain about the media’s exploitation of suffering people, yet readily join in the country’s gluttony for the violence-filled products of commercial entertainment” (p. 3). In particular, in the age of digital news media, this concept seems topical, as with the competition for page views to drive up advertising and subscription dollars, digital news media may be more inclined to engage in this type of “gluttony” to attract readers to their respective websites. According to Simpson and Coté, while “some journalists are reporting on violence with extraordinary sensitivity, others do continue to treat victims as necessary props for stories about human cruelty but props without a chance to affect the way the stories are told” (p. 2).

Similarly, Edna Buchanan noted that the weight given to the perpetrator in crime stories is unbalanced. In *The Corpse Had a Familiar Face* (1987), she described the problem as such:

Bad guys are never boring or all bad. Like cops, they are human. That is what makes them dangerous. Crooks can captivate you if you drop your guard . . . We are always fascinated by bad and beautiful people who lack our built in restraints . . . Writers have to work at not glamorizing them. Crooks may be colorful, quotable and even likeable but they are not nice people. When you tell their stories, it always helps to give the victims equal space (p. 152).

While a reliance on sensationalized news content may potentially bring in more readers, it can have negative outcomes including apathy towards violent news amongst readers or even “triggering” effects on those readers suffering from mental traumas. As Susan Moeller suggests in *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death* (1999), “[sensational] formulaic coverage of similar types of crises make us feel we really have seen this [exact] story before” (p. 13). Erica Scharrer, in “Media Exposure and Sensitivity to Violence in News Reports: Evidence of Desensitization?” (2008), also found that viewers who are repeatedly exposed to heavily sensationalized news media may develop a form of apathy towards trauma-related news; a theory that will be explored further in the literature review. In other words, the

constant inclusion of sensational, trauma-related stories numbs the audience to true human suffering.

1.3 Criticisms of Sensationalism

If sensationalism and the news have shared a connection from the earliest incarnations of news manufacturing, criticisms of it have existed just as long. As Stephens noted, writing “over the centuries many serious journalists and a few blue-nosed censors have struggled to excise bloody and obscene stories... from the news” (p. 114). Additionally, he described other ways in which past critics have attempted to control, if not fully excise sensationalistic news content. One attempt was called “moralizing.” As Stephens described it, it was a way to make sure sensationalistic content contained “a stern moral message as an escort” (p. 118). If the censors and detractors of sensationalism could not make readers and listeners avoid lurid and violent tales, then they would at least include a moralistic warning to those who might take pleasure in or romanticize the gruesome acts described in the stories.

With the advent of online news media, excising sensationalistic news content has become more difficult as audiences do not need to rely on a limited handful of sources for their news information anymore. However, this does not mean that no controls or limits on more sensationalistic news stories exist. In Canada, judges may, in certain court cases, institute publication bans under the Canadian Criminal Code (*Criminal Code*, 1985, s. 486), although this is typically done with a view to protect victims or victims’ families or in court cases where the complainants are minors. (By comparison, in the United States, the First Amendment generally protects media from such publication bans.) Self-censorship among media organizations exists, which the Project Censored website describes as “the intentional non-inclusion of a news story – or piece of a news story – based on anything other than a desire to tell the truth” (Project Censored, n.d.). Of course, censorship of news exists in non-democratic countries around the world. In 2015, the Committee to Protect Journalists listed the 10 least press-friendly countries that included Eritrea, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Iran, China, Myanmar and Cuba (“10 Most Censored Countries,” 2015). It should be noted that this type of censorship usually involved political expression and not necessarily trauma-related or sensational stories.

Trauma-related news is only one type of “bad” news that exists, and not all trauma-related news is sensational. Yet criticism of excessive trauma-related news is often more common than criticisms of other forms of “bad” news because “the public generally complains about violence in the media only when it involves human beings” (Russell, 2006, p. 157). In the aftermath of a trauma-related event, those directly impacted by it and the larger community in which the event occurred are liable to feel vulnerable, a vulnerability that can only be complicated and, in some cases, made worse by a poorly reported and sensationalistic news story, resulting in a backlash against the offending news media. Linda Kay et al. (2010), interviewing local residents in the aftermath of media coverage of a murder in a small town in Quebec, identified five issues or “themes” that these people expressed about the news media’s presence in town and their portrayal of both the victim and the other residents in news stories. Those themes were “alienation from the community, anger at the media’s public construction of the community, intrusion on community life, intrusion on the private processes of grief, and triggering renewed feelings of loss and grief” (p. 425). This research suggested that trauma-related news, above all other types of news stories impacts a community and creates a perception that the news media are obsessed with trauma-related stories, especially if the news stories are not presented in a compassionate manner.

Another example of negative reactions to perceived sensationalized stories occurred in the aftermath of the October 2014 Parliament Hill shooting. An article published on the non-profit news website *Mother Jones*, entitled “Canada’s Coverage of the Ottawa Shootings put American Cable News to Shame” (West, 2014), contrasted the CBC’s coverage of the shootings with American cable news coverage of them, in addition to other similar events. West wrote:

No newscast, especially live news, is immune to mistakes, and during the initial haze of leads and counterleads, it's easy to point fingers. But for the six-some hours of CBC broadcasting I watched... I never once felt lost in the wall-to-wall speculation that has characterized so many recent breaking-news broadcasts in the United States (West, 2014).

These criticisms of the American news networks stand in sharp contrast to the accolades West gave to Canadian news media. Likewise, an article in the British newspaper *The Telegraph*, appearing the day after the *Mother Jones* article and entitled “American TV networks, criticised the American media's coverage of Ottawa shootings” (Alexander, 2014) by noting that it revealed details before confirming them to be true, as well as presenting the events of the

shooting in a highly dramatized manner. In particular, one image seemed to circulate frequently through further articles with the same criticisms – a screenshot contrasting the homepages of *CBC News* and *CNN* in the aftermath of the shooting; the screenshotted *CNN* headline reading “Terrified Capital” while *CBC* instead used the less dramatic headline “Soldier dies after Parliament Hill attack, gunman also shot dead” (Jönsson and English, 2014).

Sensationalism, with the violent and negative imagery so often associated with it, has never been without its detractors. From the attempts to discourage sensationalism by using stern moral messages, to the academic, public and professional backlash faced by those journalists and editors who embrace sensationalism, this type of news and its critics have co-existed for ages. However, De Botton proposes a challenge to these critics of sensationalism in his book *The News: A User’s Manual* (2014), writing “rather than just inveigh moralistically against our fascination with heinous events, the challenge should be to tweak how they are reported – in order that they better release their important, yet too often latent emotional and societal beliefs” (p. 192).

1.4 News Values

In addition to ideas about sensationalism in news, this research focuses on the intersection between them and news values, those factors that influence how much emphasis (or any) a news story receives. Even though there has yet to be a single set of news values applicable for every newsroom, the following chapter will explore various definitions and taxonomies that have been identified by scholars. For example, one of the earliest taxonomies appearing in journalism scholarship (that was created independently of a specific news outlet) is by Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge in 1965. The work of other researchers will also be discussed, showing that news values have a fluid, sometimes transient nature. The ultimate hope is that this discussion of news values will help to discern an organic connection between news values and the inclusion of sensational/traumatic/dramatic news stories in newspapers and online news sites.

1.5 Negativity Bias

As this thesis proceeds, it is informed also by the concept of the "negativity bias," which has been described as a psychological effect that concerns how individuals come to "see" more bad in the world than good. This phenomenon is described by Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratlavsky,

Catrin Finkenauer and Kathleen Vohs in “Bad is Stronger than Good” (2001). While this research assesses the prevalence of negative stories considered sensational and trauma-related, the negativity bias suggests that readers and audiences may “see” more bad information than good information because their brains retain the negative aspects of a news story longer than the “good” or even “mundane” elements of a story (Baumeister et al, 2001). The concept will be will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

1.6 Research Objectives

As noted, this thesis contends that most stories about trauma-related events are by their very nature sensational and are perceived to be attention grabbers with intrinsic news value. To restate the purpose of this thesis, it is to explore whether trauma-related stories form a greater percentage of the content of newspapers and their online editions. Therefore, the following research questions guide this research:

1. Do news stories about trauma-related events exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage? If so, how?
2. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers? If so, how?
3. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ from a print and on-line edition? If so, how?

These questions are connected to a broader research question that constitutes the discussion section of Chapter 4.

4. What do the data say about news values, sensationalism and tabloidization, and the negativity bias?

Because this research is focused on choices that editors make in deciding about what to include in print and online editions, this thesis also concerns ideas about news values, those internal guidelines that help editors determine what is newsworthy. This will be explored further in Chapter 2.

To address the research questions, a content analysis will be used to analyze the online and print editions of three major Canadian newspapers in the nation's largest news market, Toronto: the *Toronto Star* and *thestar.com*; the *Toronto Sun* and *torontosun.com*; the *National Post* and *nationalpost.com*. These three papers were selected because they reach a significant readership in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and because they may represent a spectrum of the

GTA's political, social and economic demographics. A more detailed explanation of the methodology used in this thesis will be explained in Chapter 3.

A detailed discussion of the research findings of the content analysis, with an emphasis on what these findings suggest about sensationalism and the news, will be discussed in Chapter 4. Additionally, this chapter will also include a comparison of the data taken from the two broadsheet papers to the data collected from the one tabloid paper, to determine if there is any difference between both the quantity and types of sensationalized news appearing in both newspaper formats.

1.7 Research Contributions

This thesis hopes to contribute to the broader understanding of whether or not the collapse of rigid deadline schedules and advent of the 24-hour news cycle has prompted the increase in the number of trauma-related stories that appear in print and online editions. A particular interest of this thesis is the potential difference in trauma-related content between print and online editions, given that online news media face the evolving challenge of attracting readers to gain advertising revenue. Some scholarship on sensationalism and the news takes for granted the prevalence of sensational news, especially those that involve stories about violence. As Michael Young suggested in *Death, Sex and Money: Life inside a Newspaper* (2007), "It [the news industry] is... a world that possesses its own terminology and where talk of a 'good story' inevitably involves the gruesome death of someone, either by murder or by accident" (p. 13). To Young, like other scholars discussed in Chapter 2, the news media is highly fixated on trauma-related events, a perception that this thesis seeks to question. Similarly, De Botton described the daily news cycle from the audience's perspective, arguing "every time we connect with the news, we can be sure we will be confronted with graphic accounts of some of the most appalling eventualities that can befall our species... The news leads us very reliably into the crucible of human horrors" (p. 191). De Botton's perception of news media is very close to the news media described by Young, that again, this thesis seeks to question through a review of select news media and their coverage of trauma-related events.

1.8 Thesis Chapter Outline

This thesis has been organized into four five chapters. This *introductory* chapter has defined the research questions and goals that form the basis of this thesis. As such, the remaining chapters will be organized as follows:

Chapter 2 involves a *literature review*; a detailed overview of a selection of previous scholarly literature that informs and guides this thesis, as well as an expansion of additional concepts which informed the development of the theoretical framework.

Chapter 3 presents a *methodology* for this thesis, expanding on the rationale for the selection of the newspapers chosen for this research. In addition, a more detailed discussion of the content analysis will be provided, including a breakdown of the specific process for gathering the data and an explanation of how the data was organized into categories and subcategories, for a more detailed analysis. Finally, there will be a discussion of some of the findings and how they relate to the concept of news values.

Chapter 4 reviews the *findings* of the content analysis and, from there, presents a detailed *discussion* of the findings in relation to the remaining concepts introduced in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 concludes this thesis, and provides suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2

As the purpose of this thesis is to address the perception that the news media rely too heavily on content that may be considered sensational and trauma-related, this chapter traces the historical connection between sensationalism and the press. In doing so, this chapter also discusses how sensationalism is connected to the tabloidization of news, another idea important to this thesis. Tabloidization is a specific popularization of news media, which is linked to sensationalism because its stylistic format demands a type of news presentation that attracts attention. The increase in sensationalism and tabloidization has been criticized because it emphasizes a lurid and trauma-related focus as a means of attracting a larger, but more “low brow” audience. Because this research focuses on story selection in newspapers and their online news sites, the chapter will expand on a discussion about news values. Again, news values, as defined in this thesis, are those guidelines that help journalists, editors, and producers determine what constitutes news. It will be particularly important to this research to determine if these guidelines are shifting as journalism adapts to new, digital formats.

Finally, because the belief that sensational stories about violence are connected to what may be called a reader’s negativity bias, an important theoretical concept for this thesis, this chapter more fully defines what the negativity bias is while linking it to research on sensationalism in the news, especially as it concerns stories about violence (or trauma).

2.1 News Values

Merriam-Webster defined “newsworthy” as “interesting enough to the general public to warrant reporting” (“Newsworthy”, n.d.). Although there are varying factors of what exactly can be constituted as newsworthy, particularly across different cultures and countries, these factors constitute news values, both internal and external, that determine what the “news of the day” is and how much prominence a particular story receives. Barbie Zelizer (2004) described news values as “external preference statements about real life... Asserting that journalists could not do their work without these values” (p. 66). Similarly, Simon Cottle in *Global Crisis Reporting: Journalism in the Global Age* (2009), said that news values were “principles of selection,” which included “drama, conflict, violence, human interest and, in the case of visual news media, arresting images and spectacle” (p. 77, 113).

However, what constitutes a core, strictly defined set of news values remains fluid. In 1965, Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge created an important taxonomy of news values for “The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers.” The researchers examined the “relationship between the *events*, the *perception* with all selective and distorting factors that are operative under different circumstances, and the *final image*” (p. 64, 1965) of the news event. Galtung and Ruge’s work concerned the process of how news was made, from the physical event to the final news story and the factors which shaped the creation of the news story. From that work, Galtung and Ruge identified twelve criteria that they argued were important in the decision-making behind what constituted the news: 1) Frequency, 2) Threshold, 3) Unambiguity, 4) Meaningfulness, 5) Consonance, 6) Unexpectedness, 7) Continuity, 8) Composition, 9) Reference to Elite Nations, 10) Reference to Elite People, 11) Reference to Persons, and 12) Reference to Something Negative (cited in Harcup and O’Neill, p. 262-263, 2001).

Thirty-six years after the creation of this taxonomy, Tony Harcup and Deidre O’Neill revisited it to test whether these twelve criteria still applied to contemporary British news media. In “What is News? Galtung and Ruge revisited” (2001), Harcup and O’Neill examined three British newspapers, the tabloid *The Sun*, the broadsheet *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail*, a “middlebrow” paper. In doing so, they found that Galtung and Ruge had focused too much on foreign and international news and “ignored day-to-day coverage of lesser, domestic and bread-and-butter news” (p. 276). As Harcup and O’Neill argue, “Galtung and Ruge’s taxonomy of news factors appears to ignore the majority of news stories” (p.276). To account for this, Harcup and O’Neill suggested a revised taxonomy of 10 “contemporary” news values. These news values included: 1) The Power Elite, 2) Celebrity, 3) Entertainment, 4) Surprise, 5) Bad News, 6) Good News, 7) Magnitude, 8) Relevance, 9) Follow-up and 10) Newspaper Agenda (p. 279). Harcup and O’Neill’s analysis of Galtung and Ruge’s taxonomy seems to suggest that what constitutes “news values” can be dependent on a number of different factors, including country of origin and type of paper analyzed amongst others.

In *News Talk: Investigating the Language of Journalism* (2010), Colleen Cotter examined five journalism textbooks and the varying news values listed in each textbook, to determine if there were any similarities between the individual textbooks definition of “news values.” Cotter’s analysis indicated that even with a number of different schools of thought, there was

overlap in terms of what the different authors constituted “news values.” From this analysis, some of the most frequently cited values include: Impact/Consequence, Timeliness, Proximity, Prominence, Novelty/Rarity and Conflict (cited in Cotter, p. 69).

In a critique of Steve Chibnall’s 1977 article “Press Ideology: The Politics of Professionalism,” Chris Greer suggests that “news values are seldom written down and journalists generally experience considerable difficulty in articulating them when asked. Nevertheless, a sense of news values is internalized... and acts implicitly to provide a professional stock of knowledge that enables assessments about what is newsworthy” (p. 203, 2010). However, Greer retraces the eight new values Chibnall identified earlier; 1) Immediacy, 2) Dramatization, 3) Personalisation, 4) Simplification, 5) Titillation, 6) Conventionalism, 7) Structured Access and 8) Novelty (cited in Greer, p. 203) – and suggests that while it is difficult to articulate news values, there are similarities in these values that is shared between journalists.

As the news media shifts increasingly online, some studies show that the news values that once guided the news making process are being shaped by how much attention online readers give the stories. In “Negotiating Professional News Judgment and 'Clicks': Comparing Tabloid, Broadsheet and Public Service Traditions in Sweden” (2013), Michael Karlsson and Christer Clerwall (2013) examined “whether clicks change news values and have an impact on news routines in tabloid, broadsheet and public service newsrooms” (p. 65). Their research suggests that “clicks are now having a daily impact in all of the news rooms, as all journalists are very aware of their existence and have, in various ways, incorporated them to inform news decisions on a regular basis” (p. 73). The researchers noted that “media organizations... incorporate clicks into their news judgment to some extent, regardless of tradition” (p. 76).

Though there may be many differing opinions on what constitutes “news values,” it seems to be widely accepted that news values do not exist in a bubble. The idea of what defines the “news” can be impacted by numerous factors from editorial bias to, as suggested earlier, the demand for page views or “clicks.” Writing on the production of news and news values, Sigurd Allern (2002) suggested another possible factor which could have an impact on news values; “sensationalism, which arises out of the tendency of news media to attach news value to situations characterized by conflict” (p. 142). Sensationalism extends beyond news values though as it can be applied to news media in numerous ways including how news stories are produced and what impact sensationalized news may have on an audience. News values are of

importance to this thesis in that while sensationalism and tabloidization may impact how a news story is told, news values are a deciding factor behind if a news story is even told in the first place. News values are often cited as an excuse by editors and journalists alike when criticized for including sensationalized or trauma-related news stories; the argument being that more often than not, trauma-related stories meet enough news value criteria to be included in a broadcast or newspaper. In this regard, it is important to note that trauma-related news stories naturally possess certain news values, such as conflict, human interest, reference to something negative, and impact, amongst others.

2.2 Sensationalism and the News

The idea that the daily news cycle is overly invested in stories of violence is not new, and, as Chapter 1 noted, some scholars even suggest that sensationalism and news have always been linked, dating back to the earliest forms of journalism (Stephens, 1988). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this style of journalism was given one of its most defining names “yellow journalism,” a style of reporting that “adopted varying proportions of sensationalism, populism, and socialism to address the interests of new, urban, working-class, and immigrant readers” (Kaplan, 2008). While the name “yellow journalism” or “yellow press” is no longer applied to contemporary news media in the same context, it does not mean that detractors of sensationalized news have likewise disappeared. In 1969, then-Vice President, Spiro T. Agnew “blast[ed] television news for highlighting stories about violence, confrontation, and bad news about America. Bad news, according to Agnew, meant dissent, confrontation, radicals, violence, controversy, strikes, lawlessness, and overly dramatic news” (Johnson, 1996, p. 202). Agnew said “[b]ad news drives out good news. The irrational is more controversial than the rational. Concurrence can no longer compete with dissent. Normality has become the nemesis of the network news” (quoted in Eidenmuller, 2001). While the format and delivery of news media may continue to change over the decades since Agnew made his comments, his criticisms have retained some contemporary resonance.

Sensationalism appears frequently in the news media, usually through the use of bombastic language and visuals, typically in an effort to appeal to emotion and increase readership/viewership. To reiterate, sensationalism is defined as “a tendency in the reporting of events to dramatize and exaggerate in order to attract attention and

increase circulation or audience share” (Chandler and Munday, 2011). In *Scooped!* (1998), David Krajicek described the use of sensationalism as “an information conveyor heaped with deviance, death, moral decay... feeds a gaping media maw that has proved to have an insatiable appetite for the violent, the sexy and the salacious” (p. 3-4). Journalists and editors may elect to play up certain elements of a news story, in an effort to draw more attention to the story.

Anne Hardy, Knut De Swert and Daniella Sadicaris in “Does market-driven journalism lead to sensationalism in television news? Explaining sensationalism in 11 countries” (2010) defined sensationalism as “provok[ing] the senses and emotions of audience members, thus attracting the attention of larger audiences” (p. 1). As they noted, “the expected outcomes of sensationalism and a purely economic approach of journalism come down to the same thing: getting the attention of as many viewers as possible and minimizing costs. Sensationalism is then just a logical step in the process of market-driven journalism” (p. 1). For these researchers, sensationalism does diminish other journalistic values and news quality. Yet sensationalism in the news remains

Sensationalism and Psychology

Citing Pooley’s “Grins, Gore and Videotape” among others, the psychologist Deborah Serani (2008) argued that “news programming has moved from providing citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing to showing programming that attracts ratings by exploiting people’s vulnerabilities” (p. 240). Serani’s work focused on the psychological implications of sensational news content and cited a case study of a patient whose anxiety disorders became heightened when exposed to sensational news stories of a violent or traumatic nature. In “If It Bleeds, It Leads: The Clinical Implications of Fear-Based Programming in News Media” (2008), she noted that presenting news stories in a sensational way adds to the apprehensions of audiences. As she observed, “fear-based newscasts weaken the ego’s stimulus barrier, amplify annihilation anxiety, and set into motion a variety of traumatic defensive operations” (p. 241). The research indicated that these types of stories may have lingering impacts on certain viewers.

Similarly, in “Media Exposure and Sensitivity to Violence in News Reports: Evidence of Desensitization?” (2008), Erica Scharrer examined the psychological impact of sensationalism in the news and argued that “heavy local news consumption - presumably due to the presence of

violent content - can contribute to a blunted response to news stories regarding real-life violent events” (p. 291). Her research findings suggested that the oversaturation of sensationalized news stories in the media may “desensitize” viewers to depictions of violence, causing them to pay less attention to it. To restate, Serani's and Scharrer's research suggested that overly violent and sensationalized news may further harm viewers who already suffer from other mental health issues, such as anxiety or PTSD and that constant exposure to violent and sensationalized news stories may lead to a state of apathy in viewers who may cease to care about the “bad things” that are happening in the world.

In “Bad News Revisited: The Portrayal of Violence, Conflict, and Suffering on Television News,” (1996) Roger Johnson argued that “[n]o one claims that media violence has a unitary or uniform effect on all viewers. The effects are complex and may lead to fearfulness and callousness as well as to thoughts or acts of aggression” (p. 202). Johnson examined five categories of, what he labeled, “bad” news during nightly television news broadcasts: 1) Violent crime, 2) Tragedy and suffering, 3) Conflict and discord, 4) Social and collective protests involving violence or threats of violence and 5) War and military affairs (p. 205). He found that “averaged over the four stations, slightly more than half (53.4%) of all news stories depicted various forms of VCS (violence, crime and suffering)” (p. 207). Johnson wrote:

Nevertheless, the formula, ‘If it bleeds it leads’ is legendary in newsrooms. The judgments made by professional news directors about viewer tastes unfortunately are not always accurate, and the selection of stories is often based on unsubstantiated assumptions, standard production practices, and mechanical formulas (p. 210).

This research suggested that violence in TV news dominates all other kinds of televised news stories because of a belief that viewers want to see “bad” news stories. Even though this thesis analyzes the content of print and online news sources, the scholarship seems to be applicable to print news media, as well as televised news media.

Sensationalism and Emotions

In “Emotion aside or emotional side? Crafting an ‘experience of involvement’ in the news” (2011), Chris Peters wrote that the trend towards sensationalizing the news, amongst other factors, had led to an explosion of what he terms “infotainment” a type of story that is sensationalized to be more entertaining. Peters examined both news and faux news programs such as *The O’Reilly Factory*, *The Today Show* and *The Daily Show* amongst others, as well as

printed news and found that, perhaps there needs to be different models of journalism for different formats, including those with heavy emotional components. “By considering journalism’s emotional side,” he wrote, “even when it claims to put emotion aside, we can focus on the subtleties of style that provide the tone, feel, and potential success of the news in an increasingly fragmented, sceptical, and commercialized era” (p. 311).

Writing on the news media’s role in the aftermath of tragedy, Carolyn Kitch and Janice Hume argued that the news media can and do play a supporting role in the healing process in the aftermath of a trauma-related event that involved death. They caution that journalists must be careful how these stories are presented because of the complex emotions of those who are in the grieving process. As they observed, “the line between exploitation and reality can be a hair’s breadth of opinion” (p. 4, 2008). For the journalist, Kitch and Hume argued, the story could represent the pinnacle of newsworthiness, but to a grieving community, it could appear as sensationalistic and exploitative. In describing the criticisms of the news media coverage of the 2004 tsunami that killed 230,000 people in 14 countries, the authors highlighted the phrase “disaster porn” (p. 4) to suggest the perceived overabundance of sensationalized stories in the aftermath of this tragedy.

Sensationalism and Audiences

In “Is the Internet Bad News? The Online News Era and the Market for High-Quality News” (2009), Paul Frijters and Malathi Velamuri, citing an earlier study, found that “news stories with moderate to high levels of sensationalism have increased from 25% to 40%” (p. 12) during the years of analysis that witnessed the biggest shift from more “traditional” formats of news media to the broader sphere of digital news media. However, Frijters and Velamuri highlighted an important change, noting that “mainstream audiences get ‘soft news’ [comparable to Peters’ ‘infotainment’] while individuals interested in specific news get it from specialized sources and mainly pay for it via their exposure to advertising” (p. 28). Much like the perceived divide between tabloid news and broadsheet news, Frijters and Velamuri argued audiences that seek out high-quality news stories on the internet are willing to pay for it while more general readership will continue to consume news that is free to access but may be more sensationalized.

Sensationalism and Tabloidization of News

Closely related to sensationalism is the concept of the tabloidization of news. Any and all news media can sensationalize a story but tabloidization employs sensationalism along with other stylistic formatting elements to create a very specific type of news presentation. The original definition of tabloid was merely a descriptor of the layout of the paper, that was “a newspaper format with a page size approximately half that of broadsheets” (Chandler and Munday, 2011). In recent times, the word tabloid has become shorthand for a particular type of news, “[a] pejorative term for a downmarket style of journalism that is populist and/or sensationalist” (Chandler and Munday, 2011). The tabloidization of news involves a shift away from hard news and serious factual information and toward soft news and entertainment.

Michael Serazio summed tabloidization's effect on news in “Rethinking a Villain, Redeeming a Format: The Crisis and Cure in Tabloidization” (2009): “It seduces through fleshy fashion and vapid content... We seem to sense it in the... vaudevillian bluster of cable news. It feels cheap and for the practitioners and press observers, that somehow feels wrong” (p. 13). However, Herbert Gans countered in “Can Popularization Help the News Media?” (2009) that fears of this type of news have a classist overtone:

The term is meant to be pejorative and is used to blame all the usual suspects for what is viewed as a decline in news media. Since moderate and low income people are the main consumers of tabloid news, tabloidization is a particularly handy verbal weapon used by more educated people to disparage the culture of less educated ones (p. 17).

Gans argued that the term “popularization” instead of “tabloidization” better explains what is really happening in the press. As in this essay as well as his previous works, Gans has reasoned that even the social elites, such as academics, partake in popular culture; therefore, to Gans, “popularization” becomes a less loaded term than “tabloidization” and does not carry the same classist connotations.

Henrik Örnebring and Anna Maria Jönsson offered an historical look at tabloid journalism in “Tabloid Journalism and the Public Sphere: A Historical Perspective on Tabloid Journalism” (2004). They found that “that much of the criticism levelled at the journalistic other [meaning more ‘common’ audiences] through history has been based on a set of values that to a large extent coincides with the values of cultural and political elite groups— groups that, in some cases, did not take too kindly to the competition for resources and attention that tabloid journalism offered” (p. 292). Örnebring and Jönsson noted the longstanding criticism of tabloid

journalism, that tabloid journalism is considered to be potentially "immoral, unethical and possibly dangerous." (p. 292). Like Gans, Örnebring and Jönsson argued this historical discourse about tabloid journalism has been controlled by social elites, who are likely to condemn this form of journalism. Despite this observation, tabloid news still emphasizes the sensational.

In his content analysis of tabloid newspapers, Morten Skovsgaard examined the professional values of journalists who work for tabloid newspapers. In "A tabloid mind? Professional values and organizational pressures as explanations of tabloid journalism" (2014), he argued that "tabloid journalists are commonly studied in a vacuum" (p. 201). Skovsgaard's research found that "tabloid journalists emphasize sensationalist news values more and relevance news values less than their colleagues at other types of media outlets" (p. 213). He noted that the tabloidization of news is strongly connected to the creation of profits for the newspapers.

Alé Smith, Lynnette Fourie and Johannes Froneman explored the differences between tabloid newspapers in South Africa and found that one of the newspapers achieved greater success because it focused:

On local issues that concerned the community [...] this tabloid provided its readers with information that was close to them – not only geographically, but also on an emotional level... Stories were presented in an engaging, colourful, bold and sensational manner. Moreover, the tabloid spoke to its readers in a language they could relate to (p. 238).

The researchers noted that by focusing on local news, rather than international or celebrity news, readers could engage more with *Kaapse Son* because it informed them of what was happening in their community and in a language that they could best understand.

In his comparative research on tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, Folker Hanusch examined visual images of death, which he noted "is important because such images can tell us much about a culture's attitudes to the end of life" (p. 498). Hanusch compared these images from eight different countries (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States) and found that "while broadsheets in all countries were more restrained than tabloids in showing gruesome images, the differences were least pronounced in the UK and the US" (p. 509). Hanusch's findings are of particular interest, at least when applied to North American and British newspapers, because he questions "why... this large gulf exist[s] particularly in Germany and Norway, and to a slightly lesser degree in Austria and Switzerland, while it is non-existent in the UK and the US?" (p. 509). The differences between the visual content in tabloid newspapers and broadsheet newspapers is minimal at best,

suggesting that for all the criticisms levelled at tabloid newspapers, the broadsheet papers printed in North America and the United Kingdom are actually not that different in terms of visual content from their tabloid counterparts.

2.3 Negativity Bias

Another area of psychological study that is important to this research concerns the concept of a negativity bias. The negativity bias is an open area of psychological study that has recently been applied to the study of journalism. In essence, the negativity bias helps account for the belief that readers/viewers feel as though they are being inundated with “bad news” even though the amount of negative news may be comparable to or sometimes even less than the “good news” stories.

In “Bad is Stronger than Good” (2001), Roy Baumeister, Ellen Bratlavsky, Catrin Finkenauer and Kathleen Vohs investigated the negativity bias and the idea that “bad is stronger than good, as a general principle across a broad range of psychological phenomena” (p. 323). As the researchers assumed, “negative information receives more processing and contributes more strongly to the final impression than does positive information” (p. 323-324). They suggested that “many good events can overcome the psychological effects of a single bad one. When equal measures of good and bad are present, however, the psychological effects of bad ones outweigh those of the good ones” (p. 323). As it concerns this thesis, the research would also suggest that news content that is negative (i.e., trauma-related) would leave a more lasting impact on consumers. If this is true, then news media that focus on sensational stories with violent (i.e., trauma-related) content might contribute to the negativity bias.

Margo Arango-Kure, Marcel Garz and Armin Rott noted that the idea of a negativity bias is referenced in Galtung and Ruge's article “Bad News Sells: The Demand for News Magazines and the Tone of their Covers” (2014). Arango-Kure, Garz and Rott argued that “people are genetically predisposed to pay more attention to bad news; negative information often causes people to react psychologically and physically” (p. 201) by analyzing whether there is a link between the content run on the front page of a news magazine (the common format for news reporting in Germany, as opposed to a newspaper) and sales of that particular edition. The researchers’ findings, over this twelve-year study, indicated that “the estimation results indicate a

significant, positive correlation between the publication of explicitly negative magazine covers and sales" (p. 199).

Negativity bias and gender

In studying the negativity bias as well as readers' tendencies to choose 'bad' news over 'good' news, Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Rasha Kamhawi in "Hard Wired for Negative News? Gender Differences in Processing Broadcast News" (2006) found the following:

Male viewers are associated with a negativity bias, reporting the highest arousal levels and producing the best recognition memory and comprehension scores for negatively valenced messages. Women, in contrast, show signs of an avoidance response to negatively framed news, rating positively valenced stories as more arousing as well as processing such messages more effectively than negatively framed message (p. 346).

Grabe and Kamhawi's research was driven by the idea that women may be more predisposed to the negativity bias because of evolutionary influences. To them, the negativity bias is "gender-specific" (p. 365). According to Grabe and Kamhawi, men may actively seek out "bad news," whereas women may actively try to avoid it. As Grabe and Kamhawi observed, male and female reactions to negative stimuli, such as "bad news," may be related to evolution in that men were typically the expected "protectors" of a family unit while women tended to focus on family member's survival and thus less likely to be attracted to anything "bad" or "dangerous."

The researchers further studied the notion of a gendered reaction to negative news in "Engaging the Female Audience: An Evolutionary Psychology Perspective on Gendered Responses to News Valence Frames" (2008). This research supported an idea that indicated there is a "biological predisposition to pay attention to threats in [an] environment" (p. 34) and could serve as a rationale as to why women might be more inclined to react negatively to bad news:

Women demonstrate an avoidance response to negative news: they enjoy it less, are less able to identify with people who are featured in such stories and are less appreciative of journalistic effort in reporting negatively framed stories. Men demonstrate an opposite pattern of effects. They embraced negatively framed news, reporting more enjoyment and involvement and less criticism of negatively than positively framed news (p.48)

However, Grabe and Kamhawi cautioned that there are simply too many factors, both biological and societal, to fully explain the difference between gendered reactions to negative information.

Mariska Kleemans, Paul Hendriks Vettehen, Johannes Beentjes and Rob Eisinga described similar findings in “The Influence of Age and Gender on Preferences for Negative Content and Tabloid Packaging in Television News Stories” (2012), which explored age difference as well as gender. They found that “men have a stronger preference for tabloid packaging than women” (p. 691); however, they also found that “the study findings did not show gendered preferences for the content of news stories” (p. 692). Kleemans et al. presented a challenge to Grabe and Kamhawi’s research. According to these authors, a style of news reporting which focuses on the stories of those individuals and communities impacted by the event, “feminizes” or “humanizes” the news, therefore influencing female viewers to connect emotionally with a particular news story type, unlike news stories that are presented in a traditional journalistic fashion that emphasizes the broad, objective details of the event.

2.4 Summary

Three major concepts were discussed in this chapter: 1) news values, 2) the rising use of sensationalism and tabloidization, a format of news publication which has also become synonymous for much of the criticism of the news media, and 3) the psychological concept called the negativity bias. These ideas form theoretical foundations for this thesis and guide the research and analysis that follows in the subsequent chapters.

As this chapter discussed, news values inform what news events become news stories, although there has been concern, particularly with the move to digital formats, that news values may become compromised in the push to gain more “clicks.” Sensationalism factors into how news values may be changing in this new media world, especially if it is true that more sensational stories (i.e., trauma-related) dominate the news content of newspapers and their online sites. As this thesis has noted, all trauma-related stories have sensational elements. Sensationalism also concerns the tabloidization of news, a style of news that relies on sensationalistic stories to sell news content. Finally, this chapter also discussed the negativity bias, which some scholarship has indicated exists and may have an impact on how individuals perceive news content despite a reality that may counter that perception.

The following chapter lays out the methodology for how this thesis addresses the research questions posed at the beginning of the chapter, including a rationale for newspaper selection and an explanation about how the research was conducted. In addition, Chapter 3 will

present some of the findings from the content analysis and discuss how these findings concern the concept of news values.

Chapter 3

To garner a better understanding of the research that has been undertaken, it is necessary to recall from Chapter 1 its overarching goal, which is to address the perception that the news media rely too heavily on content that may be considered sensational and trauma-related. To reiterate, this thesis defines trauma as “a deeply distressing or disturbing experience” (“Trauma”, Oxford Dictionary). In Chapter 2, this thesis examined three concepts that inform the research. Those concepts are news values, or how “newsworthiness” is determined; sensationalism, or the practice of creating visual and bombastic news stories, and its sub-category, tabloidization, or the perceived negative impact of tabloid newspapers on broader news media; and finally, the negativity bias, a psychological phenomenon that may influence how individuals view the world. In addition, this thesis contends that trauma-related news events inherently contain sensational and dramatic elements and, therefore are an ideal type of news story to examine. Lastly, Chapter 2 discussed the negativity bias and its connection to a possible explanation for a common perception that news media contain more negative news. If the negativity bias drives individuals to recall more “bad” news than “good,” it may also lead them to believe that news media are overly fixated on “bad” news stories.

The discussion around trauma-related stories and sensationalism is important because one goal of this thesis is to determine whether online and print editions of newspapers differ in the amount of trauma-related stories they contain. This thesis hypothesizes that digital editions might contain more trauma-related stories as a way to attract more online clicks or hits. This thesis also questions whether there is a difference in content between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers regarding their number of trauma-related stories. Finally, it holds that a tabloid-style newspaper and its online edition would contain more trauma-related news content as compared to its broadsheet counterparts.

The purpose of this chapter is to lay out a methodology that can be used to examine a newspaper's print and online content and identify the types of stories they contain. The major research questions guiding this portion of the research are the following:

1. Do news stories about trauma-related events exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage? If so, how?
2. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers? If so, how?

3. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ from a print and on-line edition? If so, how?

To address these questions and to determine the findings presented in Chapter 4, a simple quantitative content analysis will be done. Following that analysis, the findings will address a final research question:

4. What do the data say about news values, sensationalism and tabloidization, and the negativity bias?

3.1 Content Analysis

Before proceeding with the discussion about this thesis methodology, it is worth reiterating that this research considers all trauma-related stories as having some elements of sensationalism even if they are not highlighted with attention-getting headlines, text and photos. In other words, these stories are likely to provoke emotional reactions in people, regardless of whether or not the news event has been further sensationalized by the news media.

To examine the perception of a news media reliant on trauma-related and sensationalized news, the research questions are addressed with statistics concerning the number of trauma-related stories in print and online newspaper editions. Because of this, a content analysis provides the best method for data analysis. As defined here, a content analysis is a “technique for the systematic study of media content” (Priest, 2010, p. 35). More specifically it is “a precise estimate of presence or absence of different features, such as which topics occupy what proportion of the news or how many times certain kinds of sources receive mention... [While] quantitative content analysis most often tests specific hypothesis” (p. 20), or “tend[s] to address research problems requiring a description or an explanation of the relationship among variables” (Creswell, 2008, p. 51). While the research does not have a stated hypothesis, it does hold, as noted above, that tabloid newspapers or their websites would contain more trauma-related stories. It also holds that online newspaper editions, regardless of format, will contain more trauma-related stories as a way to attract more clicks on their websites.

3.2 Newspaper selection

To examine the frequency of trauma-related stories and to analyze the differences in content between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, the research focused on Toronto, ON,

which is Canada's largest city with newspapers that reach the largest readership in the country, as well as being home to newspapers with some of the largest circulations.

During the research period the city had 18 daily newspapers (as of 2015, one of the newspapers is no longer publishing daily news stories), so to narrow the number used for analysis three criteria were considered: 1) the newspaper must be published in English; 2) it must have a regularly updated online edition; and 3) the news content must be produced by the newspaper, instead of coming solely from stringer sources or affiliate newspapers.

Of the 18 newspapers, 11 were eliminated because they are published in languages other than English, including Italian, Spanish, Korean, Cantonese, Mandarin and Punjabi; as the researcher is only fluent in English, the content must be published in English. Additionally, two non-English newspapers and a third English-language paper were also eliminated as all three exclusively publish their content online. Finally, the city's free daily newspapers such as *24 Hours* and *Metro* generally do not generate much original news content, so they were also eliminated from consideration.

The remaining newspapers that matched the selected criteria were two daily, local papers (*The Toronto Star* and *The Toronto Sun*) and two daily, national papers, (*The Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*). A decision was made to eliminate *The Globe and Mail*, as it had already been the focus of significant research on Canadian newspapers. Additionally, from the *Globe and Mail*'s own mission statement, it is a national paper which defines the metro region as “all of Ontario, excluding Ottawa and Ottawa Valley area” (“Regional editions,” n.d.), a marked contrast from *The National Post*, *The Toronto Star* and *The Toronto Sun* that delimit the metro area as being strictly the Greater Toronto Area. With these criteria in mind, the following newspapers were selected for analysis: *The Toronto Sun*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The National Post*. In brief, *The Toronto Sun* is a tabloid with a daily circulation of 169, 219. *The Toronto Star* is a broadsheet with a daily circulation of 357, 612. Finally, the third selection, *The National Post*, is also a broadsheet with a daily circulation of 169, 566.³ Each of these newspapers also has an expansive and regularly updated online edition. The differences between broadsheet and tabloid newspaper format and content were discussed in Chapter 2, but to reiterate, a tabloid is defined as having a “format with a page size approximately half that of broadsheets” (Chandler

³ Circulation data, which was taken from the Newspapers Canada 2012 circulation data report, which collects information on circulation from the AAM, CMCA, CCAB or owner-provided data.

and Munday, 2011), while broadsheet newspapers are considered “the largest newspaper page format, with long tall pages” (Chandler and Munday, 2011).

3.3 Boundaries of Analysis

The thesis examined news coverage during the late spring and summer months of 2014, selecting the final weeks of May, June, July and August for analysis. Because this research is interested in discerning the frequency of trauma-related stories in newspapers, the selected weeks provide a relatively random cross-section of news coverage during these months. Notably, no major international news events occurred during the weeks of analysis, though there were still some significant news events, such as the death of Michael Brown, a teenager from Ferguson, MO who was shot and killed by police officer Darren Wilson in August 2014. The analysis included all stories appearing in section one, or the “front section” of the *Toronto Star* and the *National Post*, which possess defined individual sections. For the tabloid *Toronto Sun*, the research examined its major news pages, which were distinguished from the rest of the paper by the types of content being run (i.e. news articles versus editorial or entertainment content). Employing the definition of trauma from Chapter 1, the research identified all trauma-related stories in these news pages and then organized them according to the categories noted in section 3.5.

For consistency throughout the analysis, the online editions of the three papers were analyzed between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m. EST during the four weeks of analysis. This timeframe was selected as it was assumed that by this point of the day the majority of news stories would have been posted to the websites, barring any late breaking news events. This would allow for not only a comprehensive coverage of what types of news stories were included during the day but also for the research to differentiate between the news stories included in the hard copy editions which were constrained to the previous day’s news events and the news stories included on the websites which could be added and updated as events unfolded.

3.4 Category Selection for Trauma-Related Stories

As with any content analysis, the selection of categories is important. The process for the sorting of data into categories began with a review of the type of news stories that reflect some news values such as conflict, impact, emotion, and controversy. Following that identification,

two broad categories of news stories were created⁴. The first category involved stories about trauma-related events that occurred without any human agency. This category is labeled “Non-Human-Caused Trauma” and included news stories that were acts of nature or were largely accidental in nature (i.e. a plane crash occurring due to mechanical failure, rather than human error). The second category concerned news stories where the causal element of a trauma-related event could be traced to a component of human agency; therefore, this broad category is labeled “Human-Caused Trauma.” This distinction between categories is important because, as Simpson and Coté (2006) have stated, “in an accident or natural disaster, victims or families may find some comfort by telling themselves 'It's nothing personal. It just happened... It wasn't my fault.' A victim of violent crime usually sees it differently: 'This was a deliberate attack on me personally... I'm angry. I'm bitter. I'm ashamed'” (p. 20). Different types of trauma-related news stories may resonate differently with audiences; in particular, certain types of trauma-related news stories may have a more local focus (such as crime news stories), which may resonate with audiences more than those news stories that have an international focus. Both categories are broad enough to include most, if not all, types of trauma-related news events.

Within the category of "Human-Caused" trauma-related stories, several subcategories emerged and were subsequently labelled. These smaller groups of stories included war, terrorist acts, crime (murder, sexual assault, arson, car accidents, maritime disasters due to human error/negligence, home invasions, spree shootings/mass killings, kidnappings, railway accident due to human error/negligence) and accidental deaths. Similarly, within the category of “Non-Human-Caused” trauma-related stories, four sub-categories were identified and included natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires and tornadoes), health crises, mechanical disasters (plane crashes, railway accidents due to mechanical failure, maritime disasters due to weather/mechanical failures), and structural disasters (building collapse, accidental property fires). The following section presents those findings in order of frequency.

⁴ Please see Appendix 1 for brief discussion of non-trauma-related news story categories.

3.5 Category Findings

Print Editions

Table 1

Type of Trauma-Related Stories	Total Trauma-Related (TR) Stories			Totals	%
	<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Sun</i>		
Human-Caused					
Crime	39	59	79	177	48%
War	25	29	15	69	19%
Terrorist Acts	16	20	10	46	13%
Accidental Deaths	9	8	10	27	7%
Non-Human-Caused					
Mechanical Disasters	17	8	9	34	9%
Natural Disasters	4	3	3	10	3%
Health Crises	0	0	0	0	0%
Structural Disasters	3	0	0	3	<1%
Total	113	127	126	366*	99%

*There were an actual 364 trauma-related stories; however, two stories fell into two categories and were counted twice.

As Table 1 outlines for the print editions, the sub-category that contained the most commonly appearing trauma-related stories was **Crime** with 177 news stories. The second most frequently appearing stories fell into the sub-category of **War** with 69 news stories (likely owing to the *National Post* and the *Toronto Star*'s extensive coverage of international news). The third most frequent was **Terrorist Acts** with 46 news stories. Finally, in the Human Caused category, **Accidental Deaths** was the fourth most frequent with 27 news stories. Shifting to non-human-caused trauma categories, the category that contained the most number of stories was **Mechanical Disasters** with 34 news stories. The remaining three categories **Natural Disasters**, **Health Crises** and **Structural Disasters** all had 10 or fewer stories

Table 2

Type of Trauma-Related Stories	Total Trauma-Related (TR) Stories			Totals	%
	<i>thestar.com</i>	<i>nationalpost.com</i>	<i>torontosun.com</i>		
Human-Caused					
Crime	39	62	49	150	58%
Accidental Deaths	9	19	9	37	14%
Terrorist Acts	8	25	2	35	14%
War	7	6	2	15	6%
Non-Human-Caused					
Mechanical Disasters	4	11	3	18	7%
Natural Disasters	1	2	0	3	1%
Health Crises	0	0	0	0	0%
Structural Disasters	0	0	0	0	0%
Total	68	125	65	258	100%

As Table 2 details, the category with the most frequently appearing type of trauma-related news stories online was **Crime** with 150 news stories. The second most frequently appearing fell into the category of **Accidental Deaths** with 37 news stories. The third most frequent was **Terrorist Acts** with 35 news stories. Finally, the last most frequently appearing type of news stories in the Human Caused category was **War** with 15 news stories. In the Non-Human Caused category, the sub-category with the most frequently appearing news stories was **Mechanical Disasters** with 18 news stories. The remaining three categories, all non-human-caused, **Natural Disasters**, **Health Crises** and **Structural Disasters** had 10 or fewer stories.

Noticeably, in both the online and hard copy editions of the three newspapers, Crime stories appeared the most, consisting of 48% of all trauma-related news stories in the hard copy editions and 58% of all trauma-related news stories in the digital editions. Such a statistic is worth discussing because it does concern news values. These findings suggest the importance of crime stories in the news media. In his book *Scooped!* (1998), Krajicek argued that “crime news... is cheap and easy to produce and [the] beat is dominated by untrained reporters who bite too quickly when politicians and police officials offer the populist, superficial, ‘lock-em-up’ point of view” (p. 180). Krajicek did caution that journalists should “explore solutions” (p. 9) to why crime occurs in a community, noting that news should inform, “rather than alarm” (p. 9). Similarly, Steven Chermak argued that the media present “a limited picture of crime and victims alike because of selection decisions that are made based on organizational constraints” (p. 96, 1995), constraints which could include both limited resources and a limited time-frame in which to cover a story. Chermak’s analysis of news presented similar results found in this thesis, with

crime being the fourth most appearing type of news story, after sports, general interest and business (p. 102). Chermak cautioned, “*any* crime has the potential to be a news story, and its level of newsworthiness determines the process that will be used to produce the story” (p. 125). Crime stories are also considered to be sensational; this suggests that how much attention a story is given is dependent on how newsworthy an editor believes a story to be.

In a survey of British tabloid journalists, Anna Gekoski, Jacqueline Gray and Joanna Adler found that some journalists believed that crime-related news events have intrinsic news value because they are crime-related. In other words, “the newsworthiness of homicide [for example] may be being determined not by readers’ interests, but by journalists’ false beliefs in readers’ interests” (p. 1228, 2015). As other studies cited in their article suggest audiences are frequently turned off by heavy coverage of crime news events (p. 1228-1229). Yet as these findings indicated, crime stories dominated the types of trauma-related news stories in both the hard copy and online editions. This inclusion of so many crime stories is clearly an editorial choice that must be considered⁵.

Moving beyond news values and crime, the newsworthiness of “bad” news is a subject that has been debated for some time. As some scholars, like Gekoski, Gray and Adler contest, editors and journalists alike assume the inherent newsworthiness of trauma-related news events, regardless of how their readers might actually feel. Chapter 2 introduced the idea that news values are fluid, as there is not yet a universally accepted set of news values for the news media. However, several different lists of news values from different scholars were reviewed, including Galtung and Ruge’s seminal taxonomy on news values. It is worthwhile to note, while discussing the “news value” of trauma-related news stories, that almost all of the lists of news values include at least one news value, which could be directly related back to trauma-related news stories.

These values include “reference to something negative” (Galtung and Ruge); “bad news” (Harcup and O’Neill); “conflict” (Cotter); and “titillation” (Greer). There were also some additional news values identified in the lists, that while not specific to trauma-related or “bad” news, still relate closely to these types of news stories. These additional values included

⁵ There is also the cost of producing crime news that should be considered as part of the editorial decision process. As David Krajicek argued, “crime news... is cheap and easy to produce” (p. 9, 1998), which could explain at least some of the proliferation of crime news within newspapers and online news editions.

“unexpectedness” (Galtung and Ruge), as most trauma-related events are unexpected, though other types of news stories can be too; “surprise” (Harcup and O’Neill), as with “unexpectedness;” “newspaper agenda” (Harcup and O’Neill), which could relate back to the concept of tabloidization; “impact/consequence” (Cotter); and “dramatization” (Greer), which again, while related to trauma-related news, is not a news value unique to trauma-related news. These news values seem to suggest that while trauma-related news is not necessarily given prominence over other news stories, scholars who have studied news values believe that there is some additional inherent news value to news stories that are trauma-related in nature.

Writing on a study conducted of news coverage of suicide bombings following the September 11 World Trade Centre attacks, David Cook and Olivia Allison found that “more news value [or newsworthiness] was assigned to suicide bombings after September 11... Suicide bombings were found to have increased newsworthiness when Americans were victims, when the casualties were high or when American ‘strategic’ or foreign-policy allies were targeted” (p. 112, 2007). Though Cook and Allison suggested that the adage “if it bleeds, it leads” held true in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, they did argue that, when stories about the 9/11 attacks were removed from their analysis, proximity to the United States and its ally countries, rather than negativity or conflict became the dominant news value.

Similarly, Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, writing on the practices of commemorative news reports in *Values and Choices in Television Discourse: A View from Both Sides of the Screen* (2015), argued that “in the context of commemorative news stories of events that are still felt to be very ‘fresh’ in audiences’... consciousness given their recentness and cultural trauma potential, the priority appears to be... the news values of immediacy and novelty through commemoration” (“Television, Collective Memory and the Commemoration Cure,” Chapter 5). For Lorenzo-Dus, the news values which informed these commemorative traumatic news stories did not explicitly have to do with “bad” news, like the news values suggested above, but rather it was the nature of the specific news story, namely the “immediacy” and “novelty” of it, which informed the choice. Therefore, Lorenzo-Dus’ findings suggest that journalists may not put negative news values above other news values, but rather let the values of “immediacy” and “novelty” dictate the story selection; those news values being ones that could be applied to nearly any news story, traumatic in nature or not.

While it is difficult for this thesis to argue the full extent that news values can have in influencing what stories an editor will decide to include in a newspaper, the focus given to certain categories of trauma-related news over others, particularly in the case of trauma-related crime stories does suggest that there is something in the decision process that affords these types of news stories more coverage than others. A more in-depth review of steps needed to analyze this possible connection between news values and trauma-related news stories will be discussed in Chapter 5. Being that the focus of this thesis was on trauma-related news stories, categories for non-trauma-related news stories were not developed for the research; however, there is a brief discussion, to inform further study, of these hypothetical categories which can be found in Appendix 1.

3.6 Summary

This chapter outlined a methodology for this thesis and presented some of the findings in Tables 1 and 2, which detailed the types of trauma-related stories that appear most frequently in the print and on-line editions. It also introduced a discussion on how news values might influence which trauma-related events receive the most coverage, or whether the events themselves might inform the news values being used. In particular, a concept was introduced that while there are news values that could specifically relate back to “bad” news events, most traumatic news stories are informed by more universal news values such as “proximity” or “immediacy.”

Chapter 4 will present the remaining findings of this research, including the number of trauma-related news stories for each of the three newspapers, in both the hard copy and online formats, as well as the total number of trauma-related news stories for both formats. In addition to presenting the findings and providing answers to the three research questions introduced in Chapter 1, it will also make an effort to connect the findings to the remaining concepts which were introduced in Chapter 2; sensationalism, tabloidization, and the negativity bias.

Chapter 4

The previous chapter presented findings related to the trauma-related news content in two broadsheet newspapers and one tabloid newspaper and their online editions. As they indicated, human-caused trauma-related stories, notably crime, tended to dominate this type of content. Chapter 3 also discussed the relationship between those types of trauma-related stories and news values. This chapter continues with a presentation of the findings that will address the larger research questions, which are:

1. Do news stories about trauma-related events exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage? If so, how?
2. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers? If so, how?
3. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ from a print and on-line edition? If so, how?

An additional purpose of this chapter is to show if these findings connect those questions to the overarching goal of this thesis, which addresses a perception that the news media rely too heavily on content that may be considered sensational because of its trauma-related nature. Further, this perception may also be linked to a theoretical idea borrowed from psychology called the "negativity bias," which suggests that an audience may be predisposed to see more negative stories, such as trauma-related ones, even when that may not be the case. As Chapter 2 discussed, notions about sensationalism are connected to ideas about news values and to ideas about creating news content that attracts more readers, viewers, listeners, and, hopefully more online clicks. All of these ideas are connected to this research question that constitutes the final section of this chapter:

4. What do the data say about news values, sensationalism and tabloidization, and the negativity bias?

As the connections between and news values were already discussed in Chapter 3, this section will focus on addressing the findings as they concern sensationalism and tabloidization and the negativity bias.

To reiterate from the previous chapter, this research conducted a simple content analysis that identified trauma-related stories in three Toronto newspapers and their websites. They were analyzed across a period of four months that began in May 2014 and ended in August 2014. One

week from each of the four months was chosen for analysis, so, in total, 20 days' worth of data was collected. Because the *National Post* does not publish a Monday print edition during the months of July and August, 18 days' worth of data were analyzed; however, 20 days of data from its website were examined. The total number of news stories were identified and designated as either trauma-related or non-trauma-related. These data are presented in Tables 3 through 6. All of the tables will follow a similar format.

Print Edition News Stories

Table 3 is divided into two main sections that present the number of trauma-related stories and the total number of stories for each of the months analyzed. This includes the number of trauma-related news stories on the front page of the newspaper, the number of trauma-related news stories in section 1 of the *Toronto Star* and the *National Post* or the corresponding news pages of the *Toronto Sun*. Table 3 also presents the percentage of trauma-related news stories for both the front page and main news section or pages, as well as the percentage of all trauma-related news stories found in each of the three newspapers.

Table 3

<i>Toronto Star</i>	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total News Stories					% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	Total	May	June	July	August	Total	
Front page	2	2	9	1	14	37	40	46	41	164	9%
Section 1	19	25	30	25	99	152	161	170	159	642	15%
Total	21	27	39	26	113	189	201	216	200	806	14%

<i>National Post</i>	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total News Stories					% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	Total	May	June	July	August	Total	
Front Page	4	2	9	8	23	59	50	53	51	213	11%
Section 1	19	31	25	27	102	179	213	180	159	731	14%
Totals	23	33	34	35	125	238	263	233	210	944	13%

<i>Toronto Sun</i>	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total News Stories					% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	Total	May	June	July	August	Total	
Front Page	1	2	1	2	6	10	11	11	11	43	14%
News Pages	29	23	36	32	120	162	160	173	167	662	18%
Totals	30	25	37	34	126	172	171	184	178	705	18%

As the findings show, there were 113 trauma-related stories in total for the *Toronto Star*, including 14 front-page and 99 section one trauma-related news stories, out of a possible 806 total news stories. This represents 14% of the total news stories analyzed in the newspaper. The *National Post* published 125 trauma-related, including 23 front-page and 102 section-one news stories, out of a possible 944. This represents 13% of the total news stories analyzed in the *National Post*. Finally, the *Toronto Sun* had 6 trauma-related news stories on its front page (a much smaller number likely owing to the tabloid format of the paper) and 120 trauma-related news stories in its main news section out of a total of 662 news stories. This represents 18% of the total number of stories analyzed for this period of analysis.

Table 4

	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total News Stories					% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	Total	May	June	July	August	Total	
Front Page	7	6	19	11	43	106	101	110	103	420	10%
Section 1/News Pages	67	79	91	84	321	493	534	523	485	2,035	16%
Totals	74	85	110	95	364	599	635	633	588	2,455	15%

Table 4 presents the total number of stories analyzed in all three newspapers and the number of trauma-related stories. Like Table 3, Table 4 is divided into two main sections: trauma-related news stories and the total number of news stories for each month of analysis. In all, 2,455 stories were analyzed over the four months. As Table 4 shows, 364 or 15% of the stories could be considered trauma-related. (It is worth noting again that Table 1 in chapter 3 showed 366 trauma-related stories; however, as explained, two of those stories were counted twice.) These data address the first research question: *Do news stories about trauma-related events exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage?*

Tables 3 and 4 indicate that the number of trauma-related stories do not exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage. In fact, the percentage of trauma-related stories, overall, suggest that these kinds of stories do not dominate new content. The findings also suggest that perceptions of the media as focusing on these types of stories is just that – a perception. This will be discussed further in a later section on the negativity bias. Even so, the findings do imply that trauma-related stories do receive some degree of prominence on the front page of the newspaper. Of course, the data only reflects what was found in the three selected newspapers during the period under study. It is also important to note that the research is not accounting for all sensational stories, such as political scandals, etc. These are interesting data in that it also suggests a broader study is needed.

These findings also address the second research question: *Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers? If so, how?* Among the selected newspapers, the number of trauma-related news stories differs in that the tabloid *Sun* had a higher percentage of trauma-related news stories than either the *Post* or the *Star*. More specifically, the *Sun*'s total percentage of trauma-related news stories was 18 %, 4% higher than the *Star*'s 14% and 5% higher the *Post*'s 13% average. These findings suggest that the number of trauma-related stories does differ between tabloid newspapers and their

broadsheet competitors with the *Sun* having a greater percentage of trauma-related stories than either broadsheet newspapers. Question 2 will be addressed again in the following section and the implications of the findings will be discussed in section 4.1.

Online Edition Stories

Attention turns to the online editions of the selected newspapers. Again, the research holds that trauma-related stories might appear more frequently as a way to attract online readers and clicks. Table 5 presents the findings for the three news websites – *thestar.com*, *nationalpost.com* and *torontosun.com* – that details the number of stories for each. Table 6 presents the total number of trauma-related stories in relation to the total number of stories analyzed.

Table 5

<i>thestar.com</i>	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total	Total News Stories					Total	% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	May		June	July	August				
Homepage	22	11	21	14	68	114	165	142	126	547	12%		

<i>nationalpost.com</i>	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total	Total News Stories					Total	% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	May		June	July	August				
Homepage	27	26	32	40	125	214	191	199	194	798	16%		

<i>torontosun.com</i>	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories					Total	Total News Stories					Total	% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August	May		June	July	August				
Homepage	21	12	13	19	65	72	58	65	77	272	24%		

As Table 5 indicates, over four months, *thestar.com* had 68 trauma-related news stories, out of a total 547 news stories, resulting in 12% for trauma-related news stories. *nationalpost.com* had 125 trauma-related news stories out of a total 798 news stories, which resulted in a 16% average of trauma-related news stories on its website. Finally, *torontosun.com* contained 65 trauma-related news stories, the lowest number of the three websites, of a total 272 news stories, resulting in a 24% average of trauma-related news stories. It is worthwhile to note that *torontosun.com*, despite having the highest percentage of trauma-related news stories, had the fewest trauma-related news stories of the three newspapers. However, it also had the lowest number of news stories overall and this resulted in creating a higher percentage of trauma-related news stories than the two broadsheet newspapers.

What might account for this is the *torontosun.com*'s emphasis on visual content, which is something tabloid newspapers tend to exploit. Notably, each news story had an accompanying photograph, while the Sun's competitors, *thestar.com* and *nationalpost.com*, presented more "text-heavy" websites. Both websites contained only a few selected news stories with an accompanying photograph or video. As a result, both websites devoted more space to news items than *torontosun.com*. The role of images in tabloid newspapers, and their online editions is worth noting because one of the criticisms of tabloidization and its apparent low-brow nature is that readers rely more on images than text (Bird; 2014; Hanusch, 2013; Karlsson and Clerwall, 2012). The perception of tabloidization and its relations to the findings from Tables 3 through 6 will be discussed further in Section 4.1

Table 6

	Trauma-Related (TR) Stories				Total	Total News Stories				Total	% of TR Stories
	May	June	July	August		May	June	July	August		
Homepage	70	49	66	73	258	400	414	406	397	1,617	16%

The data in Table 6 show that the three news websites contained 258 trauma-related news stories, out of 1,617 total news stories. This resulted in an average of 16% trauma-related news found on the selected websites. This statistic is very close to the 15% average of total trauma-related news stories found in Table 4 for the print editions and suggests that the number of trauma-related news stories as a whole is not significantly different for either platform of news delivery.

Question 3 asked, *Does the number of news stories about trauma-related events differ from a print and on-line edition?* Comparing the results of Table 3 with Table 5, with the exception to the *National Post* and *nationalpost.com* that had identical numbers of trauma-related stories in either formats, the answer appears to be yes, with the digital editions of the *Toronto Star* and the *Toronto Sun* containing fewer trauma-related news stories than their hard copy editions. The *Toronto Star* included 113 trauma-related stories in total, in contrast to *thestar.com*'s 68 trauma-related stories. Similarly, the *Toronto Sun* included 126 trauma-related news stories, to *torontosun.com*'s 65 trauma-related news stories. This finding does not support this thesis' hypothesis that the digital editions would have more trauma-related news stories. Beginning the research for this thesis, the belief was that, due to the increased competition online, digital newspapers would include more trauma-related news stories to attract more readers. A comparison of the data in Table 5 to the data in Table 3 indicates that this is not the

case, as the digital editions of the three newspapers included fewer trauma-related stories than the hard copy editions.

However, it is important to note that the *Toronto Star* had a greater percentage of trauma-related news stories than *thestar.com* (14% to 12%, respectively), but the *Toronto Sun* had a lesser percentage at 18% than *torontosun.com*, which had 24% of trauma-related stories. As suggested, this is likely because the *Toronto Sun* contained more news stories overall with 705 news stories than *torontosun.com*, which had 272 news stories. In fact, both newspapers included more news stories than their online editions. As with its hard copy editions, *torontosun.com* had less trauma-related news stories than *thestar.com*; however, because *torontosun.com* also included fewer news stories overall than *thestar.com*, this resulted in a higher percentage of trauma-related stories for *torontosun.com*.

Chapter 2 touched upon the idea that as newspapers move more online, certain news values, such as conflict, or reference to something negative or titillation, might push editorial decision towards an effort to gain ‘clicks’ and attract more readers. However, as the numbers indicate, the digital editions of the *Star* and the *Sun* actually contained fewer trauma-related news stories than their hard copy editions.

4.1 Discussion

As Tables 3 through 6 addressed the first three research questions, this section discusses the fourth research question guiding this thesis - What do the data say about news values, sensationalism and tabloidization, and the negativity bias?

Sensationalism and Tabloidization

To reiterate from Chapter 1, this thesis holds that there is a perception that news media is fixated on stories that are trauma-related, therefore sensational, in nature (Young, 2007; Serazio, 2009). However, the findings in Tables 3 and 5 suggest that this perception is not necessarily true. If on average, only 15% of content from the selected newspapers analyzed could be considered trauma-related, this suggests that other factors might contribute to this perception; one of which will be discussed in the section concerning the *negativity bias*. This thesis also contends that all trauma-related news stories have elements of sensationalism in them. As Mitchell Stephens argued “sensationalism is unavoidable in news - because we humans are

wired, probably for reasons of natural selection, to be alert to sensations, particularly those involving sex and violence” (“A Short History of News,” 1990). Because this thesis was focused on a small sample of newspapers, it is difficult to assert any definitive correlation between sensationalism and a negative perception of news media. Still, the findings in Tables 3 through 6 hint that some perceptions of the news media as fixated on trauma-related news stories are not necessarily supported by hard data. Another common complaint of sensationalism in the news, as summed up by the aphorism “if it bleeds, it leads” is that other news stories may receive less coverage or even be left out all together in favour of sensational and trauma-related new stories (Krajicek, 1998). However, as the findings in Tables 3 through 6 illustrated, this is not supported by the data presented here in this study.

In “A Short History of News,” Stephens provided a unique call to action for his readers, writing that “we can still protest when the news gets too irrelevant, too shallow... The desire to keep up with the news seems basic to our species, but that does not mean that in learning about the world we have to limit ourselves to just satisfying that desire” (1990). It is easy to inveigh against sensationalism but more difficult to consider why audiences might react in certain ways to sensational news stories. This thesis does not purport to be able to explain how sensational and trauma-related news stories impact audiences in different ways. While Stephens asked his audience to question the types of news stories that prevail, this content analysis suggests that it may be time to question why the perception of an overly sensationalized news media still exists.

Tabloidization is connected to sensationalism and the perception that news stories or events that provoke negative emotions or sensations are somehow “bad.” (Gans, 2009). As the findings indicated, the tabloid *Sun* has a higher overall percentage of trauma-related news stories, in both its print and online editions, especially regarding the greatest number of crime news stories. This difference is noticeable in the print editions with the *Sun* having an 18% total, to the *Star*’s 14% and the *Post*’s 13%. The difference becomes even more noticeable when comparing the online editions of the three, with the *tontosun.com* having a 24%, to the *nationalpost.com*’s 16% and double *thestar.com*’s 12%.

One possible factor identified during the research period that might contribute to these higher percentages was the tendency of the *Sun* to write largely about local (GTA) news, while the *Star* and the *Post*’s main news sections were a combination of local (GTA) news, Canadian news, international news, and, in the case of the *Post*, political news. More specifically, the *Star*

has a section dedicated to GTA-area news; however, as this section is not part of the main news section, it was not accounted for during the research period. Upon review though, the *Star's* GTA section contained some of the same news stories, which were included by the *Sun* in its main news pages, resulting in a higher number of crime news stories for the *Sun*. While this factor cannot speak to the overall perception of tabloidization, it does suggest a reason why, if many of the crime news stories being covered by the *Sun* were local to the GTA in nature, there may have been more crime news stories in the *Sun* than in its broadsheet counterparts, which do not afford as much space for local news as the *Sun*.

Of course, the research sample makes it impossible to make broad generalizations about tabloidization and online news. However, the data in Tables 3 and 5 seem to affirm the answer to the second research question, which is that the number of trauma-related events do differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers. A larger number of trauma-related news stories does not necessarily confirm the existence of tabloidization though, and to some scholars, tabloid newspapers may in fact be the “future” of newspapers. As Young argued in *Death, Sex and Money: Life inside a Newspaper* (2007) “the strength of compact newspapers is... their requirement to be concise... Shorter stories, bold presentation and headlines with attitude... are what tabloids are traditionally about” (p. 207).

Negativity Bias

A particular aspect of this thesis research concerns the negativity bias, which suggests that “people are genetically predisposed to pay more attention to bad news; negative information often causes people to react psychologically and physically” (Arango-Kure, Garz and Rott, p. 201, 2014). Though this area of study is not yet expansive, at least as it pertains to the phenomenon's impact on readers, this thesis contends that it still has resonance with the results of this study. As Tables 4 and 6 indicated, only 15% and 16% of the stories analyzed may be considered trauma-related for their print and online editions respectively. Still, research has suggested that people “see” more bad news than actually exists. In “Bad is Stronger than Good” (2001), Baumeister et al. argued that “negative information receives more processing and contributes more strongly to the final impression than does positive information” (p. 323-324). There is also the likelihood that the negativity bias could be associated with the perceptions discussed in the previous section. If the perception of a news media obsessed with sex and

violence is valid, then it seems possible that audiences might simply expect to read more bad news than is actually printed in newspapers. This assumption, combined with the fact that research has shown that negative information takes the brain more time to process, could lead audiences to believe that the news media is fixated on trauma-related stories. The findings presented in this study do not support the idea that there is an over abundance of trauma-related stories. However, they do not account for all of the "negative" stories published during this period. Even so, it seems that the negativity bias is at work and the research hints at the negativity bias as a factor influencing opinions of news consumers. Granted, the influence of the negativity bias cannot be ascertained with any degree of certainty in this research.

4.2 Summary

Chapter 4 began with the further analysis of findings of the trauma-related news story categories. Tables 3 through 6 presented the remaining results of the content analysis including the total number of trauma-related news stories in each of the three newspapers and their total percentages, the overall number of trauma-related news stories across the three newspapers, the total number of trauma-related news stories in each of the digital editions of the newspapers and finally, the overall total of trauma-related news stories in the digital editions. The findings also addressed the three research questions:

1. Do news stories about trauma-related events exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage? If so, how?
2. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers? If so, how?
3. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ from a print and on-line edition? If so, how?

The data indicated that the number of trauma-related events did not exceed other types of coverage because, on average, only 15% of the news content in the three selected newspapers was identified as trauma-related. However, the data did affirm the hypothesis that the tabloid newspaper would have a greater percentage of trauma-related news stories in both print and digital editions. Finally, the research also indicated that there was a difference in the number of trauma-related news stories between the hard copy and online editions, with the selected newspapers including more trauma-related news stories in their print editions, than in their

digital editions. This finding is of particular interest as it suggests that digital newspapers do not focus on trauma-related news stories in an effort to grab reader's attention.

This chapter also provided additional analysis to connect the results of the content analysis back to the broader concepts of sensationalism, tabloidization and the negativity bias. Though connections between the research findings and sensationalism were made, it is worth reiterating that not all sensationalized news stories are trauma-related. Stories about other events, such as political scandals can be sensational. However, this research did not account for those stories. Additionally, the nebulous nature of sensationalism means that this thesis cannot account for why a strong negative reaction to sensationalism occurs; as Kitch and Hume argue in their book *Journalism in a Culture of Grief* (2008), "the line between exploitation and reality can be a hair's breadth of opinion" (p. 4).

While the findings do hint at the concept of tabloidization – that being that the *Sun* had the highest percentage of trauma-related news stories, which could influence the idea of a tabloid news media obsessed with trauma and violence, regardless of how the news stories are actually presented; the sample size is too small to properly argue if there is any actual truth to the concept of tabloidization. However, the research findings do suggest a possible existence of the negativity bias. The three newspapers analyzed contain only 15% trauma-related news content but given public opinion and past scholarly research, this could mean that there might be additional forces at work which lead to the current perception of news media.

The next chapter, Chapter 5, will include a discussion of the limitations of the thesis research, particularly in regards to the content analysis, as well as suggesting avenues of potential future study and some additional conclusions of the thesis research.

Chapter 5

In the concluding paragraphs of “Grins, Gore and Videotape: The Trouble with Local TV News,” Eric Pooley summed up his frustrations decades ago, with what he viewed as a then-recent tendency towards violent news coverage on his local television channels, writing:

As a mirror of daily life in New York, television news reflects the ongoing deterioration of the town. There are some first rate reporters in local news... and there is some balanced coverage... But even the best work can be hard to pick out of the dross. The thoughtful report is buried because sensational stories must launch the broadcast: *If it bleeds, it leads.* (p. 37, 1989)

It should be asked though, now some 27 years after this phrasing was originally introduced to the lexicon of broadcast media critique, how true is it, especially given the current constantly changing state of news media?

Though it does not have an impact on the research period of this thesis, during the writing of this chapter, one of the newspapers chosen for this study, the *Toronto Sun* and its parent company, Sun Media (itself a subsidiary of Quebecor Media), was acquired by PostMedia, which publishes the *National Post*. This potentially represents a significant change to the face of Canadian news media. If the results of this thesis say anything, then “if it bleeds, it leads” may need to be reconsidered. As the results showed, on average only 15 percent of daily news coverage in three Toronto newspapers fell under the category of trauma-related news and this percentage may be even slightly smaller, owing to the nebulous nature of “trauma” as defined by this thesis.

This thesis research set out to address four research questions:

1. Do news stories about trauma-related events exceed the number of other types of stories in newspaper coverage? If so, how?
2. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ between broadsheet newspapers and tabloid newspapers? If so, how?
3. Does the number of stories about trauma-related events differ from a print and on-line edition? If so, how?
4. What do the data say about sensationalism, tabloidization and the negativity bias?

It employed a simple content analysis to analyze news media content, and to connect this thesis to three concepts, which were identified in the literature review - news values, sensationalism and tabloidization, and the negativity bias. In four months of analysis, focusing on three Toronto-based newspapers (*The National Post*, *The Toronto Star* and *The Toronto Sun*), the findings

indicated trauma-related stories are not as prevalent in daily news coverage as other types of stories. However, the findings also indicated that content between broadsheet and tabloid newspapers differs as the tabloid *Sun* and *torontosun.com* included a higher percentage of trauma-related news stories than either of its broadsheet counterparts. The findings also indicated that there was a difference between print and online editions; though surprisingly, it was the print editions that included more trauma-related news stories than their online editions. This suggests that, at least according to this sample, online news editors did not appear to be including more trauma-related stories as a way to increase online activity.

5.1 Research Contributions

This thesis hoped to contribute to the broader understanding of whether or not the digital news revolution and advent of the 24-hour news cycle have prompted the increase in the number of trauma-related stories that are included in print and online editions. Of particular interest to this thesis was the potential difference in trauma-related content between print and online editions as online news media face the challenge of attracting readers to gain advertising revenue. Additionally, this thesis wished to contribute to the discussion of the perceived differences between tabloid and broadsheet newspapers, by providing data on these differences. Finally, it was the goal of this thesis to contribute to a growing body of scholarship on Canadian news media, as past scholarship on news media (Altheide, 2002; Bird, 1998; Botton, 2014; Chermak, 1995; Gekoski, Gray and Adler, 2012; Greer, 2010; Jemphrey and Berrington, 2010; Krajicek, 1998; Rosenberg and Feldman, 2008; Simpson and Coté, 2006; Young, 2007), has largely been focused on American and British news media.

5.2 Limitations

Although the methodology for this thesis provided a rationale for the specific research study undertaken, the study does not account for all variables at play during the editorial process for story selection. Therefore, the thesis does have several limitations. First, because the research data were drawn only from one city and three newspapers, this sample of selected newspapers and their websites is too small to allow for any broad generalizations about the current state of news media as it pertains to trauma-related news stories. Second, the research was a simple content analysis that cannot attribute motive to any of the news story selection nor

did the study apply more sophisticated statistics that might generate other useful correlative information. Regardless, the data produced is a useful snapshot of a period of time for three major Canadian newspapers in a major Canadian city. While this thesis achieved its intended goal, further research is still required.

One area of future study would be to expand this thesis research to include other major Canadian metropolitan areas. In addition to the English-language newspapers, new research should include French language newspapers (or, perhaps, other non-English daily papers). The results of this research might determine if content selection varies between English and non-English language newspapers. This might indicate a potential difference in news value emphasis. Finally, a new study could broaden the time frame to include data that are collected over a year to determine if content varied from month to month, or even week to week).

A second area of further study would be to address the perception that the tabloidization of the news media is increasing. While the data from this thesis show that the tabloid *Sun* did include more trauma-related news stories than the broadsheets *Star* and *Post*, the data cannot speak to any qualitative sense of the news stories. This would require a deeper reading of the stories that would analyze the text for elements of sensationalistic language, tone, etc.

A third area of further study would be to review what training is being offered to journalists, to help them cover trauma-related news stories in a more sensitive manner. While it cannot be expected that news media should stop writing about trauma-related news events altogether, how the events are covered by the news media could go a long way towards addressing the current perception of news media. More specifically, Simpson and Côté outlined guidelines for covering trauma-related news events in their book *Covering Violence*; which could be used as a guideline for future research.

A final suggested area of future study would be to explore the connection between the negativity bias and trauma-related news media. Some scholars (Aragno-Kure, Garz and Rott, 2014; Grabe and Kamhawi, 2006; Newhagen and Reeves, 1992; Newhagen, 1998; Trussler and Soroka, 2014) have already investigated this possible connection. However, future research could also address the perception of news media as purveyors of only bad news. This research might include the use of survey research and focus groups that might be given questions that test their opinions about the news media. Such results can be compared with the quantitative data that either support or disrupt those opinions.

5.4 Conclusion

The original concept for this thesis began with the researcher's interest in what was believed to be the relatively recent perception that news media are overly focused on stories involving sensationalism and trauma-related events. A review of past literature, as outlined in Chapter 2, indicated that the origins of this perception are much more deeply rooted than previously believed. However, there is also the perception that the push towards online news media has only further compounded this reliance on sensationalism and trauma-related news, making the focus of this thesis both a historical one and a very timely one.

As the data discussed in Chapter 4 demonstrated though, this perception of news media may ultimately be just a perception. The actual percentage of trauma-related news media was much lower than the overall percentage of news media and while some types of trauma-related news events, specifically crime, received more coverage than others, the coverage of these categories did not exceed that of other types of news coverage. Similarly, the research found that the percentage of trauma-related news stories in online news media did not exceed that of the hard copy newspapers analyzed, suggesting that the perception of online news media may ultimately also be just a perception.

Appendix 1

This thesis, being that the focus of the research was on trauma-related news stories, did not quantify the non-trauma-related news stories into individual categories, as seen in Tables 1 and 2. However, as a reference for future research that might be interested in comparing categories of non-trauma-related news stories to categories of trauma-related news stories, a sampling of non-trauma-related news categories was taken from the thesis research and is detailed in Tables 7 and 9.

As this was just a sampling, the categories determined could, in future research, have sub-categories as was the case with a number of the categories included in Tables 1 and 2. For the purpose of this appendix though, the categories included in the tables are as follows: Canada (news stories originating in Canada or with a Canadian focus); Economy/Business (financial and business news stories); Editorial; Environment (news stories with a environmental focus); GTA (news stories originating in the Greater Toronto Area); Health (news stories with a health and wellness focus); International (news stories originating outside of Canada); Lifestyle/General (entertainment news stories, “soft” news stories, etc.); Politics (news stories about municipal, provincial and federal politics); and Transit (news stories about transit funding, issues, etc.)

The results found in Tables 7 through 10 were drawn from a single day in the research period, and as such cannot wholly speak to the results of the thesis, which were drawn from a much larger data pool. However, as Tables 7 through 10 indicate, although there were some trauma-related news categories with totals comparable to non-trauma-related categories, the largest trauma-related category (that being crime for both the print and online editions) was still significantly less than the largest non-trauma-related category (that being international news for both print and online editions). The totals outlined in Tables 7 through 10 furthers the suggestion introduced earlier in the thesis that although some trauma-related categories may be given more prominence than others (particularly in the case of crime trauma-related news stories), ultimately these categories are not given more prominence than the majority of non-trauma-related categories.

Therefore, with the introduction of these additional tables, it is the intention of the thesis that these results might provide a jumping-off point for a broader discussion on the coverage of various news story categories, both trauma-related and non-trauma-related.

Print Editions:

Table 7

Type of News Story	Total Non-Trauma-Related (NTR) Stories				
	<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Sun</i>	Totals	%
International	4	13	2	19	18%
Editorial	5	9	4	18	17%
Canada	9	5	1	15	14%
Politics	4	3	5	12	11%
GTA	0	1	5	6	6%
Economy/Business	0	3	1	4	4%
Lifestyle/General	2	2	1	4	4%
Transit	0	1	2	3	3%
Environment	2	0	0	2	2%
Health	2	0	0	2	2%
Total	28	37	21	86	80%

Table 8

Type of Trauma-Related Stories	Total Trauma-Related (TR) Stories				
	<i>Toronto Star</i>	<i>National Post</i>	<i>Toronto Sun</i>	Totals	%
Human-Caused					
Crime	0	2	5	7	7%
War	1	2	1	4	4%
Terrorist Acts	1	0	0	1	1%
Accidental Deaths	0	0	0	0	0%
Non-Human-Caused					
Mechanical Disasters	4	3	1	8	7%
Natural Disasters	0	1	0	1	1%
Health Crises	0	0	0	0	0%
Structural Disasters	0	0	0	0	0%
Total	6	8	7	21	20%

Online Editions:

Table 9

Type of News Story	Total Non-Trauma-Related (NTR) Stories				
	<i>thestar.com</i>	<i>nationalpost.com</i>	<i>torontosun.com</i>	Totals	%
International	7	8	2	17	21%
Canada	2	8	2	12	15%
Economy/Business	4	7	1	12	15%
Editorial	3	4	0	7	9%
GTA	2	5	0	7	9%
Politics	2	2	1	5	6%
Lifestyle/General	2	2	0	4	5%
Transit	0	3	1	4	5%
Health	0	0	1	1	1%
Environment	0	0	0	0	0%
Total	22	39	8	69	86%

Table 10

Type of Trauma-Related Stories	Total Trauma-Related (TR) Stories				
	<i>thestar.com</i>	<i>nationalpost.com</i>	<i>torontosun.com</i>	Totals	%
Human-Caused					
Crime	2	2	0	4	5%
Accidental Deaths	2	0	1	3	4%
Terrorist Acts	1	1	0	2	3%
War	0	0	1	1	1%
Non-Human-Caused					
Mechanical Disasters	0	1	0	1	1%
Natural Disasters	0	0	0	0	0%
Health Crises	0	0	0	0	0%
Structural Disasters	0	0	0	0	0%
Total	5	4	2	11	14%

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