

**When Size Does Matter:
How Church Size Determines Media Coverage of Religion**

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Introduction

News provides consumers with a means of surveying the state of society, including its level of social deviance. From the content of news, we can ascertain which groups are perceived as legitimate within a society. In a world where communications are instantaneous, and where the pace of life is dramatically faster than it was even 25 years ago, consumers of news are forced to rely on the mass media for their understanding of the world in which they live. Information obtained from the mass media differs in quality and type from that obtained by direct experience (Wilkins, 1973, p. 23). This leaves significant power in the hands of the media. As Dahlgren (cited in Cromer, 1981, p. 21) put it 'television news has become the major source of information for a majority of the population, and the only news source for many.' The possibilities that exist in the mass media for the manipulation of public opinion are well-documented (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987). This is as true of issues of social deviance as it is of issues of political interest.

Press reports, being unable to avail of visuals in the way television does, vary in their manner of identifying social deviance. In the past, race has most often been used as an identifier in cases involving non-Caucasians involved in crime or other anti-social behavior, whereas in cases of white crime, race is not mentioned. Deviance in media reports commonly reflects the values of the power elite in a society and tends to indicate which groups are regarded as legitimate or otherwise (Thio, 1973). Different elements of media reports serve as surrogates for deviance. Amongst these are measures of legitimacy such as social evaluation; the majority are presented in a positive fashion as being law abiding (normative) and the minority in a negative fashion as being law-breaking (deviant).

In latter years, particularly with the rise of religious fundamentalism, the growth of terrorism associated with foreign nations and the social/religious divide regarding abortion, religious affiliation has become a commonly used tag in various news reports. The focus of this research is to analyze the factors that are associated with such reports. Of particular interest is the portrayal of religious groups as legitimate or not. What manner of reporting is used for religious groups and how are they, or individuals associated with them, presented in terms of the overall society to which they belong?

Hoover (1997) defines religion as the 'blind spot' of media studies. While the reason for this may originally have been the lack of dialog between the empirical base of media studies and the metaphysical/faith stance of religion, current trends in media reporting of religion seem to focus primarily on religion as a sociological phenomenon. The role of the media audience is highly significant in terms of coverage of religion. The media serve as conduit and director of the public debate, in Habermas' terms, such that it is the media who construct the religious reality for the audience, or at the very least, construct the backdrop against which religious experience is to be gauged. Such construction can be strongly affirming of religious practice, neutral, or strongly opposed. This study shows that the relevant size of a religious grouping in a media market affects media coverage. One can therefore presume that minority religions in any given market will be represented as deviant.

Background

Scott (1972, p. 12) defined deviance as 'a property conferred upon an individual by other people. Seen in this light, it is a natural phenomenon; that is, a property that has meaning to the "the natives" who employ it in the course of everyday life.'

Deviance labels are applied for many reasons, sometimes for behavior, sometimes for appearance or at other times for a wide variety of reasons. Such labeling, Scott argues, can lead to exclusion from full participation in the community. These labels are also applied unevenly. The definition of whom exactly is to be regarded as deviant varies from individual to individual in any given society. Drawing on Erikson's work, Scott says:

There are at least two features of a deviant label that make it distinctive; one is that it carries an imputation of moral inferiority and culpability, and the other, that is an essentializing label. The person to whom a deviant label has been applied is usually viewed as being morally inferior, and his condition, his behavior, or whatever basis is used for applying this label to him is interpreted as evidence of his moral culpability. ... Thus when a person has been labeled a deviant, he becomes a second-rate citizen, who is in a symbolic sense "in" but not "of" the social community in which he resides (1972, p. 15).

The use of labels in media reports is not exclusively an American phenomenon. Journal articles can be readily found on the coverage of Iranian Muslims in British media (Asari, 1989), treatment of minorities in crime reports in the French and Swiss press (Soubiran-Paillet, 1987), ethnic references in crime reports in Holland (Winkel, 1990), cultural portrayals of native Canadians (Ungerleider, 1991), emphasis on immigrants in conflict issues in France (Hargreaves & Perotti, 1991), and a host of similar issues.

In the US, the use of minority labels in reports of deviance has been a contentious issue for some time. The specifics of the issue have ranged from the use of the phrase 'black on black violence' in reports on apartheid in South Africa (Fair & Astroff, 1991), media emphasis on a connection between race and crime (Gomes & Williams, 1990), the ongoing problem of racism in social institutions (Solomon & McChesney, 1993), the difficulties between different ethnic groups (Singer, 1978) and the opposition experienced by sexual minorities (Clark, 1989).

Wilson & Gutierrez (1985) have carefully researched the treatment of ethnic minorities in the media. 'Movies, radio programs, newspapers, and newsmagazines generally ignored the issues confronting people of color in the United States, as well as their culture and traditions. When they were treated, it was often in stereotyped roles. These characterizations of minorities were largely based on the perceptions and preconceptions of those outside the groups' (p. 15). But the media treatment of minorities has not just been a lack of coverage of culture and tradition. The darker side to the lack of coverage of minority culture has been the identification of minorities in reports of socially deviant acts. Richard Schaffert (1992), writing in the context of media coverage of terrorism, states that 'through semantic labeling, the casual employment of terms ... the media can create public perceptions ... that vary in both objectivity and veracity' (p. 64).

Media fascination with deviance is a well-documented feature of news for many years (Shoemaker, 1987). Boorstin (Cromer, 1978, p. 279) speaks of the media creating 'the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life.' Given that the full definition of newsworthiness involves some role for deviance, a news focus on minorities is all the more significant when linked to deviance. When deviance becomes the driving force, news is subordinated to it. The lack of general coverage about a minority group becomes the dominant kind of report available to the general (majority) public. It is the very rules to which majorities consent that make deviance possible (Cohen, 1966, p. 4).

But deviance is more than an element of newsworthiness. It serves to prime the audience. Iyengar and Kinder (1987) state that by calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards which people use for judgment. Because consumers cannot pay attention to everything, they are necessarily selective. Wilkins (1973) indicates that consumers have direct experience

of very few news items. They take shortcuts by relying on the most accessible information sources. Frequent priming of a given story in the media means people's choice will tend to focus more on that issue. Wilkins adds that it is the more powerful sources in a society that define 'deviance.'

The framing of stories is of key relevance in the issue of priming. Iyengar & Kinder (1987, p. 90) suggest that when more media coverage interprets events within a given frame or context, the more influential that context will be in priming the public's assessment of the events. The routines of news can combine with various interest groups to frame stories in the context of a particular ideology (Reese & Buckalew, 1995).

The connection between agenda setting and deviance is increasingly important. There is a consequence of deviance reporting that affects those who share an identity with those reported as deviant — they appear guilty by association as further deviance stories are reported. This is a consequence of media treatment; as the group is associated only with deviance stories, the deviance reports become new referents for a whole group (Breen, 1997).

Deviance reporting can become a social tool for the maintaining of power and the marginalization of minorities. This has important consequences for groups targeted in the media. Shoemaker (1984) found that groups perceived to be deviant by editors were portrayed as being less legal and less viable. She concluded that there was support for the theory that the media acted as agents of social control. As Seymour-Ure (1984, p. 7) puts it, '...the churches and religion are subject to quite inappropriate criteria... and these are applied by reference to a false stereotype without much basis in popular experience.'

In the context of religious groups, legitimacy functions as a surrogate or encoded term for deviancy. The Waco episode was cast in the media as a highly

deviant event; murder, child-abuse, tyranny and separatism were the order of the day in media reports. A religious group, the Branch-Davidians, was presented as being highly deviant by focusing particularly and negatively on the legal aspects of the case. Because the principals were not law abiding, the religious component of their faith was immediately dismissed as being 'wacko.'

Religious labels, allied to legitimacy reports, have become a common feature in news reports, e.g., pedophile priest, fundamentalist cleric, right-wing Christian, Moslem fanatic, Jewish extremist. What has been true in the past of minorities in terms of media labels in legitimacy reports is true today of the reporting of many religious groups.

This research focuses principally on the phenomenon of religious labeling in legitimacy stories by examining the coverage of various religious groups. It shows how the nature of the coverage such groups is primarily associated with legitimacy reports. Because the study focuses on five religious groups — Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Jews, and Mormons — there is an opportunity to evaluate the performance of the news media with reference to the publication of legitimacy and its application by the media to different religious groups.

This study advances three hypotheses:

H₁ That the greater the percentage of the population from a religious denomination, the more prominent mass media stories will be about that religious denomination.

Newspapers appeal to their markets, and news content is most likely to reflect the characteristics of the market. Thus the preponderance of religious stories that do appear should reflect the religious composition of the community. Coverage of religious groups should normally be in proportion to group numbers in the community, so the greatest number of stories should be about the largest group (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, p. 42).

H₂ That the fewer the number of people from a religious denomination in a population, the less legitimate stories there will be about that religious denomination.

Shoemaker (1984) measured article character by evaluation and legality.

Those measures will be used in this content analysis as components of legitimacy.

Legitimate stories are those whose content is primarily about some event or behavior, the legality of which may be called into question. Such stories about individuals are used to cast whole groups in negative light by association. Religious identification is more likely to be used in stories involving legality, especially given the expectation that mainstream religions are expected to be law-abiding; but a failure to act within legal boundaries by a religious group or by a member identified as belonging to such a group is likely to be highlighted given its relative novelty. Amplification occurs when formerly religious individuals become less so and are then more prone to deviant or illegal behavior (Peek, Curry, and Chalfant, 1985; Ross, 1994). This is further accentuated when the report about behavior is negatively characterized by the author (Shoemaker, 1984).

The practice of labeling in the media is most often associated with socially disadvantaged groups or groups regarded as deviant by the media. The minority religions in a community do not have the same social influence and power that comes with being a majority. Stories about majority religious groups will have a natural audience in the community whereas minority group stories only become newsworthy (i.e., capable of attracting significant readership) if they appeal to a wider readership than the minority hence the appeal to deviance and the association with illegitimacy.

H₃ Group size and legitimacy interact such that for stories about small groups, the more legitimacy, the less the prominence; for stories about large groups, group size is not a factor in determining prominence.

H₃ suggests that smaller groups, lacking social influence and power, will be covered negatively, with a disproportionate emphasis on illegitimacy. Smaller groups

are generally more likely to be tolerated than assimilated. Labeling as illegitimate is a protective measure by the stronger over the weaker to ensure continuation of the *status quo* and clarification of the lines of demarcation.

Case Study

This study looks at media coverage of religious groups in 10 newspapers throughout 1994. The method used in this research is content analysis of newspaper coverage. Coverage is measured as:

- the prominence of stories about a religious group or an individual affiliated with a religious group, and
- the legitimacy of such stories.

The concepts being investigated are the legitimacy and prominence of media coverage of religious groups. The prominence of media coverage is measured as placement and length of each story (Shoemaker, 1984; Breen, 1995). A value for prominence is given by multiplying the number of words in a story by 3 for front page stories, 2 for section front page stories and 1 for all other stories. The legitimacy of the stories is defined along two dimensions, legal and evaluative. Legal is coded as the legality of the event being reported. Evaluation is coded as the attitude of the writer toward the group.

The Nexis database was searched with a series of general search terms.¹ The search was limited to ten newspapers, representing 10 states where one of the five religious groups in the study had its largest state population (Bradley, 1992). These were The Boston Globe, and The Providence Journal,² The Atlanta Journal &

¹ The Nexis search term was 'headline(catholic! or lutheran! or jew! or mormon! or baptist! or fundamentalis!) and date aft 12/31/93 and date bef 1/1/1995'.

² Massachusetts and Rhode Island have the largest populations of Catholics relative to the overall state populations.

Constitution, and The Commercial Appeal,³ The Milwaukee Journal, and The Minneapolis Star Tribune,⁴ The Salt Lake Tribune, and The Idaho Falls Post Register,⁵ The New York Times, and The Miami Herald.⁶

One caveat is in order at this stage – there may be a ‘threshold effect’ whereby high populations of particular religious groups may not fit the hypotheses because they do not constitute the majority religious group in a given area. This is most obvious in the case of Jewish populations, which do not constitute the majority in any state but may this apply to other groups as well. Table 1 shows the percentage breakdown of each group for the relevant states.

Sampling

The sample was generated as follows. Each pair of newspapers, corresponding to one religious group) was searched together. There were five such searches in all. For each search, all stories resulting from the search were counted and every nth story selected so as to yield approximately 100 stories. The resulting sample of 500 stories was subsequently coded for pertinence to ensure that each story is primarily about a religious group, e.g., references on a society page to a wedding performed by a religious minister would not be regarded as pertinent. Non-pertinent stories were not included in the final analysis. All stories were also coded to determine legality, evaluation, prominence and religious identification.

Coding

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- ³ Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee have the largest populations of Baptists relative to the overall state populations. Tennessee was chosen because it has the largest circulation newspapers in the region.
 - ⁴ Minnesota has the largest populations of Lutherans relative to the overall state population.
 - ⁵ Utah and Idaho have the largest populations of Mormons relative to the overall state populations.
 - ⁶ Judaism is the only one of the five faiths which does not enjoy majority status in any of the 50 states. For that reason the papers chosen were from those areas that are listed as having the highest number of resident Jews.

Legitimacy was coded on two levels, legality and evaluation. Legality was coded on a five point scale, with 1 as extremely illegal (homicide, suicide, rape, sexual abuse), 2 as highly illegal (felony, grand larceny, solicitation, conspiracy, perjury), 3 as somewhat illegal (major misdemeanors, assault, adultery), 4 as not too illegal (minor legal infringements, minor misdemeanors), and 5 as entirely legal (not at all illegal oddities, quirks).

Evaluation was coded as the perceived attitude of the writer to the religious group in question, using a five point scale from 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive). Legitimacy was to be computed as the sum of legality and evaluation, the lowest possible result being 2 (extremely illegal and very negative), the highest being 10 (not at all illegal and very positive), subject to the additive scale being reliable.

Before formal coding of stories was done, a random sample of 45 stories was made and a set of these was distributed to two independent coders who were asked to assess the stories according to the coding sheet and instructions listed in Appendix 1. Coding guidelines were to be further clarified if this initial coding experience yielded a low level of intercoder reliability. The results for intercoder reliability using Scott's pi for pertinence, legality, evaluation, prominence and religious identification, are shown below; the high scores suggest that there was no need for adaptation of the original coding guidelines.

Pertinence	=	1.00
Prominence	=	1.00
Religious Identification	=	1.00
Evaluation	=	0.91
Legality	=	0.88

Outcome

The initial sample yielded a total of 500 stories but only 293 stories were pertinent to the subject of the study. These break down as seen in Tables 2 and Table 3. The highest percentages were in the 80% - 90% range (Mormons in Utah, Catholics in Rhode Island) and the lowest less than 1% (Mormons in most states outside Utah and Idaho, Jews in Utah and Idaho, and Lutherans in Massachusetts and Utah). Some denominations were not represented in some of the sampled newspapers, and in other cases, the number of articles from a given newspaper turned out to be very small. Table 3 lists the variables of interest. Indicating wide variation in prominence and group size; both evaluation and legality are more normally distributed.

The correlation between the measured variables is seen in Table 4. These indicate that group size is correlated with evaluation, legality and prominence. Hypothesis 1 predicted that prominence and group size are related. Hypothesis 2 predicted that legitimacy and group size are related. Legitimacy was coded on two dimensions, legality and evaluation. A reliability index was created for these but Cronbach's alpha was very low. This hypothesis is therefore tested against the two measures of legitimacy in separate tests. While the correlations shown in Table 4 are modest, they are statistically significant and indicate that hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. The partial correlations with control for group size are shown in Table 5, with none of the associations being statistically significant. The primary factor in determining the nature and extent of coverage in relation to religion is group size.

Hypothesis 3 predicts an interaction between prominence and the measures of legitimacy. These relationships are presented graphically in Figures 1 and 2. ANOVA was run to test these interactions of legality, group size and evaluation with prominence. The summary results are shown with Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 1, it is clear that large groups get more prominent coverage than small groups on positive

stories while the opposite holds for negative stories. In Figure 2, large groups get more prominent coverage for legal stories than do small groups, while the opposite holds for illegal stories. In both these figures, both evaluation and legality were collapsed from five categories to three for clarity.

The main effect is from group size, closely followed by evaluation; legality is not statistically relevant in regard to prominence. In the 2-way interactions, group size with evaluation is statistically significant, while group size with legitimacy is not. Hypothesis 3 is supported but clearly the interaction of group size with evaluation is significant in terms of prominence while the interaction with legitimacy is not statistically so.

Comment

These results show clearly that reporting of religious groups is determined principally by group size. Although the religious denomination which makes up the largest or smallest group varies from region to region and from newspaper to newspaper, it is quite clear that group size is the most important factor in determining the kind of reporting that occurs.

It is interesting to note that the media in the US are devoting more coverage to religious concerns (Shepard, 1995, p. 19). But the quality of coverage leaves something to be desired. As media analyst Ellen Hume puts it, "we cover religion as politics, as a scandal, as a freak show" (Shepard, p. 22). Increase in coverage is to little avail if there is no quality to that coverage, or if coverage is predicted by group size.

The thrust of this paper is that the religion has become the deviancy of the 90s; in a liberal age, to be associated with a minority religion is to be statistically deviant. Small religious groups, and individuals associated with them, reported are less

prominently, are more prominently reported as being less law abiding, and are evaluated more negatively than their peers in larger religious groupings. In a country already divided into minorities, the media are creating a new regional divide, in which religion serves to mark minorities as different and in very negative fashion.

This study is limited in that it examines only five of the many religious groups in the United States. Other significant questions remain about other religious groups, especially those which are not in the religious mainstream, e.g., the Branch Davidians, or those that are under-represented in the national population although very large in the world populations, e.g. Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus. There has been no attempt to make a distinction between subgroups in any given religious denomination e.g., between Hasidic and Reformed Jews, or between Catholic clergy and laity. Such distinctions may provide interesting distinctions in which the smaller subgroup may be treated as though it were a minority, even though its larger parent group is a majority.

Further research is definitely indicated. Would the same results occur with a larger sample representing many more religious groups? Does dividing religious groups into smaller units generate the same effects? What effects, if any, do these realistically have on the general population? Is there a decline in religious faith that can be linked to media representations? How do media reports of religious groups as outlined in this study, affect social attitudes and values? What of other media presentations of religion, e.g., Islam as associated with terrorism?

But the possible research agenda indicated clearly extends beyond religion. All the various ways in which minorities can be created in a society are possible sources for media bias. These include gender, age, wealth, sexual orientation, and race. In the international context, the question of nationality also becomes an issue. At the heart of this paper lies a question about the 'why' of news content. Unless consumers become aware of the reasons behind the shape and form of existing content, there is little

reason to change. This paper suggests that examination of news content should be thorough and on-going, as the focus of content changes over time.

Whose interests are being served by a focus on deviance? Is there any role for good news or reports of normative events? Or are we to conclude that it is only size and power that matter in the long run, even in the mass media? Buddenbaum and Hoover (1997) suggest that 'interest in religion news is widespread, but readership and satisfaction are lower because they are more closely related to the way people perceive religion news *is* being covered and the way they believe it *should* be covered' (my emphasis). Religion is an important topic for media attention but its coverage should not be dependant on power and influence as currently appears to be the case, nor on deviance or eccentricity.

Table 1. Percentage of the state's population who are identified with each religious group.*

State	Newspaper	Cath.	Morm.	Bapt.	Jew.	Luth.
Rhode Island	Providence Journal	82.30%	0.20%	4.20%	2.10%	0.90%
Massachusetts	Boston Globe	75.10%	0.30%	2.10%	7.20%	0.20%
Utah	Salt Lake Tribune	4.80%	90.00%	1.40%	0.20%	0.70%
Idaho	Falls Post Register	14.60%	52.80%	3.20%	0.10%	5.10%
Georgia	Atlanta Journal	5.60%	0.90%	60.00%	4.90%	1.10%
Tennessee	Commercial Appeal	4.60%	0.50%	54.70%	0.60%	1.00%
New York	New York Times	61.60%	0.30%	6.10%	15.60%	2.40%
Florida	Miami Herald	28.00%	1.10%	30.00%	10.00%	2.80%
Minnesota	Star Tribune	39.10%	0.50%	2.20%	1.20%	36.60%
Wisconsin	State Journal	49.20%	0.40%	3.70%	1.10%	22.70%

* Percentages across religious groups within each state do not add to 100%, either because some people identified with other religious groups or because they did not identify with any formal religion (Glenmay, 1992, p. 12).

Table 2. Number of Articles about the Religious Groups in each Newspaper.

	Catholic	Mormon	Jewish	Lutheran	Baptist	Total
Boston Globe	14	2	11	0	3	30
Providence Journal	10	0	7	1	1	19
Salt Lake Tribune	18	50	3	1	11	83
Falls Post Register	2	0	1	0	1	4
New York Times	17	0	21	0	1	39
Miami Herald	0	1	6	0	0	7
State Journal	13	0	3	4	1	21
Star Tribune	17	0	10	8	8	43
Atlanta Journal	5	3	5	0	15	28
Commercial Appeal	8	2	2	0	7	19
Total	104	58	69	14	48	293

Table 3. Mean, Standard Deviation and Variance for Group Size, Evaluation, Legality and Prominence.

	Mean	Standard Deviation	N
Group Size	34.17	35.45	293
Evaluation	3.08	.95	293
Legality	4.20	1.24	293
Prominence	918.97	952.87	293

Table 4. Pearson's Correlation Coefficients for Group Size, Prominence, Evaluation, and Legality (n=293 for each)

	Group Size	Prominence	Legality	Evaluation
Group Size	1.00			
Prominence	.18***	1.00		
Legality	.12 *	-.003	1.00	
Evaluation	.25***	.08	.12*	1.00

*** p<.005

** p<.01

* p<.05

Table 5. Partial Correlation Coefficients for Prominence, Evaluation, and Legality with control for Group Size, (n=293 for each)

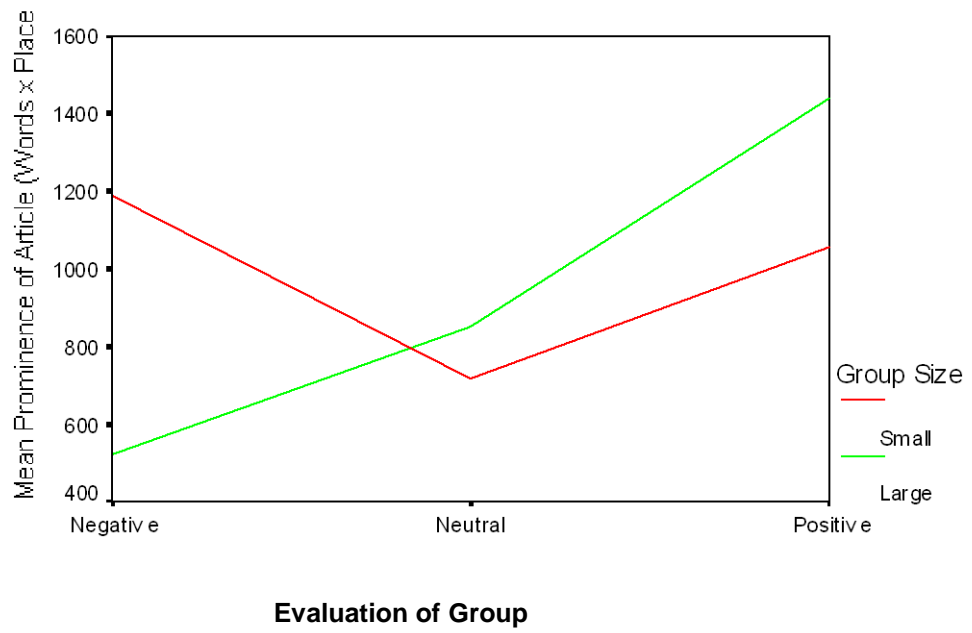
	Prominence	Legality	Evaluation
Prominence	1.00		
Legality	-.02	1.00	
Evaluation	.08	.10	1.00

*** p<.005

** p<.01

* p<.05

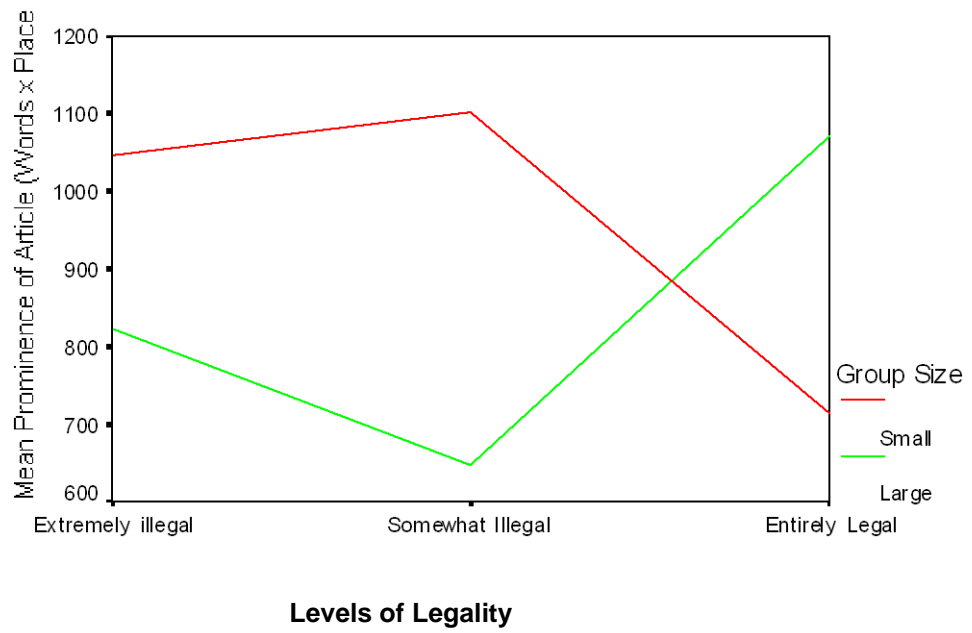
Figure 1. Prominence & Evaluation Interaction by Group Size*



Main effect of group size	$F(1,287) = 4.26, p < .05$
Main effect of evaluation	$F(2,287) = 6.87, p < .001$
Interaction of group size and evaluation	$F(2,287) = 4.89, p < .01$

*Group size was dichotomized for the purpose of this figure.

Figure 2. Prominence & Legality Interaction by Group Size*



Main effect of group size $F(1,287) = 6.40, p < .01$

Main effect of legality $F(2,287) = 2.35, p < .10$

Interaction of group size and legality $F(2,287) = 1.09, ns$

*Group size was dichotomized for the purpose of this figure.

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Appendix 1

Coding Sheet

No.	Pertinent	Source	Place	Prominence		Legitimacy /Evaluation								
				Count		Cath.	Morm.	Jews	Luth.	Bapt.				
1	Yes	BG	1	124	5	3			1	5				
2	Yes	MH	2	140									2	3
3	Yes	NYT	3	100							2	2		
4	Yes	MJ	2	80			2	3						
5	Yes	SLT	1	240									5	2