

Use of the Name of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Major News Media

18 September 2020

ABSTRACT

In the fall of 2018, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints requested that news media change the way they refer to The Church - specifically, by dropping the “Mormon” referent. This study surveyed how major national news websites referred to The Church over a specified time period and whether or not they followed the recommended style-guide. Each of the twenty largest news websites in the United States was tracked for phrases relating to The Church using a Google Boolean search. The articles were then analyzed for whether they followed the recommended style guide, as well as whether they included negative sentiment. The study found that news media still predominantly uses the word Mormon to refer to The Church. The study also found a correlation between using the term Mormon and negative editorial content about The Church or its members.

INTRODUCTION

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (The Church) has long been referred to by the name “Mormon church.” The name has a complicated history. Originally created by early 19th century newspaper editors to describe this new religious movement , “Mormon” was often employed as a derogatory term. The Church later reclaimed the phrase, however, applying it to themselves as an informal nickname.

In recent decades, The Church emphasized the use of The Church’s full name in the lead-up to the 2002 winter Olympics. At the time, they requested that news media use The Church’s full name in the first instance they refer to The Church in a news article, a request that has been widely adopted.

Through much of the late 2000s and 2010s however, The Church leaned into the Mormon identity. They used the phrase “I’m a Mormon” as the tag line for a long-running ad campaign and produced the film “Meet the Mormons.”

Then in August 2018, Church President Russell M. Nelson announced a major initiative to “bring ourselves in harmony” with the full name of The Church. Over subsequent months, The Church began to adjust nomenclature to emphasize The Church’s full name, such as changing the names to the “Mormon Newsroom,” “Mormon Tabernacle Choir,” and “I’m a Mormon” campaign.

The Church also released new style guide recommendations for news media, requesting that the phrases “Mormon” and “LDS” no longer be used to refer to The Church. By March of the following year, the Associated Press Stylebook endorsed most, but not all of those recommendations.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this report were two fold:

1. Analyze how major online news media refer to The Church or its members in published articles over a certain period of time.

2. Identify how frequently major online news media followed the requests in the new style guide.

STUDY DESIGN

The study looked at articles published on the web between July and December of 2019, approximately one year after the announcement by President Russell Nelson (October 2018). It did not look at articles published exclusively in newspapers or television reports. To limit the size of the study, only the twenty largest news media websites were included.

The sites were determined by Alexa rankings on the day before the study began July 14, 2019. While Alexa rankings are not definitive rankings of website popularity, they are widely accepted as a useful guide.

Articles were identified by creating a Google Boolean search with the keywords “Latter-day Saints” “LDS” “Mormon” or “Latter day Saints” that was limited to articles from the prior day. The search was run each day—focusing on the twenty websites identified below. Articles that appeared in the search, but did not include the keyword in the main body of the article were excluded from the study (such as sites where a different article about The Church was advertised on a sidebar).

Each article was then reviewed to identify every time The Church or its members were mentioned. To identify negative sentiment, we used the guidelines suggested by Lane Williams in his research “The Mainstream Outsider: News Media Portrayals of Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney and His Mormonism, 2006-2008.” To merit the negative sentiment labeling, portions of the article had to portray The Church as discriminative, deceptive, secretive, repressive, or insular.

No attempts were made to determine if the negative editorializing was accurate or fair.

LIST OF NEWS MEDIA

Name	No. of Articles
The Atlantic	6
Associated Press*	99
Bloomberg	1

Business Insider	14
Buzzfeed	9
CBS News	11
CNN	12
Forbes	19
Fox News	35
Los Angeles Times	31
NBC News	13
New York Times	25
NPR	16
Reuters	4
Time	7
USA Today [†]	65
Wall Street Journal	14
Washington Post	37
Wired	3

* Although the Associated Press was not one of the twenty largest news media websites according to Alexa, their content was frequently published by the other sites in our study. Only Associated Press articles that were republished by one of the other above sites, then, were included in the study. Articles were only included in the study once, even if they were published by multiple outlets.

[†] USA Today frequently published articles from regional newspapers on their website. These articles were included in the study.

Yahoo News and the Huffington Post were also on the Alexa list of the top 20 news websites, but no articles from those sites were found during the study, revealing a mistake in the Boolean search identified later.

RESULTS

The full five-month data set includes 421 articles that reference The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in some form.

Within our five-month data set, 43% of articles followed The Church's preferred style guide. Articles that mentioned The Church in a significant capacity however, only used The Church's preferred style guide 35% of the time.

Of the articles that refer to The Church by name in the title (52 out of 421) only 10% follow The Church's style guide. Of that refer to The Church in the title, but don't use one of The Church's recommended short versions, 83% continue to use "Mormon," while the remainder use "LDS." So in places where The Church's name is most prominent, compliance with the style guide request is lower. This may partly be related to the length of the proper name.

Of the full five-month data set, 80 articles were marked as including "negative editorializing." These articles leaned heavily toward not following the recommended style guide. Of articles with negative editorializing, 86% used the word "Mormon," whereas articles without negative editorializing only used the word "Mormon" 46% of the time.

A mere 6% of articles that followed the style-guide included negative editorializing, while 29% of articles that did not follow the style guide included negative editorializing. In summary, within the July-December 2019 data set, negative content about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was significantly correlated with also using the word "Mormon" to describe The Church or its members.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis only categorized and studied the terms major news websites used to refer to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Researchers did not try to determine why, for example, journalists who include negative editorial content about The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are less likely to follow The Church's recommended style guide. This subject merits further study.

Whether these patterns generalize to other publications that are smaller than those in this study, but that write frequently about The Church, may also provide important information.

This study also looks at web articles. Some journalists have suggested that a major impediment to The Church's recommended style guide is the length of its name, so further studying television news or only printed mediums might provide additional insights into relative patterns in how journalists are referring to The Church across mediums. Also studies could look at whether or not individual journalists change the way they refer to The Church between articles depending on the sentiment present. Future studies may also be strengthened by clearer distinctions between opinion writing and news reporting.

