A TALE OF TWO CENTURIES:

POWER AND INFLUENCE AS SOURCES OF MEDIA CONTENT.

BY

Úna Ní Bhroiméil, Ph.D., Department of History, &

Michael J. Breen, Ph.D., Department of Media & Communication Studies,

Mary Immaculate College,

University of Limerick,

South Circular Road,

Limerick

Ireland.

June 2000

For presentation at the 3rd International Crossroads
Cultural Studies Conference, Birmingham, UK

Introduction

The Limerick Leader serves as a regional paper of some significance in Munster, a large province in the South of Ireland. It has been in publication continuously for more than a century. This study focuses specifically on news coverage at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The paper/study compares two periods, the first from October 1st 1899 to March 31st 1900, and the second from October 1st 1999 to March 31st 2000, and seeks to ascertain what elements of its news values have changed.

Theoretical Background

Agenda setting theory states that those issues that receive prominent attention in the media become the problems the reading and listening publics regard as the nation's most important.[1] Iyengar and Kinder's work on agenda setting in television news indicates that news coverage affects the public's approach to major issues.[2] Their studies show that the people most prone to agenda setting effects are those who are neither politically active nor strongly affiliated with a political party. Significant non-political news items, then, are relatively easily placed in the public consciousness. The clear consequence of agenda setting theory is that it is the framers of the news who wield a vast amount of control over how the public views various events and personalities.

McCombs and Shaw point out that the metaphor of agenda setting incorporates other communications concepts such as status conferral, stereotyping and image.[3] This paper is concerned in particular with this later dimension of the agenda setting metaphor, and seeks to examine in particular the elements of news values, which reflect social self-understanding in terms of power, influence and importance.

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[1]   Iyengar and Kinder, <u>News That Matters</u>, 16 - 33.

[2]   Iyengar and Kinder, <u>News That Matters</u>

[3]   Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Evolution of Agenda Setting Research: Twenty Five Years in the Marketplace of Ideas," <u>Journal of Communication</u>, 43:58-67 (Spring 1993).

Shoemaker and Reese point out that there are a variety of forces that shape media content, from the level of the individual journalist to the social and ideological forces operating on those concerned with production and consumption[4]. It is the social system that represents the strongest level of influence in media production. The historical reality of such influence cannot be denied.

Of special interest is the notion of change over the course of the century. Much modern media research focuses on the mass media of the present day, with specific interest in the concept of intermedia influences. Society today is exposed to a variety of media types. Television, for example, is ubiquitous. Newspapers and magazines abound. Film, whether on the large screen or by video rental, enjoys an ease of access never dreamed of by early mass media researchers. In comparing newspaper content over two centuries, therefore, it is absolutely necessary to examine the historical and social context of production insofar as it differs from circumstances pertaining today.

Historical background.

The provincial newspaper in nineteenth century Ireland acquired a particular significance. Post-famine Ireland was highly politicised and rapidly modernising. The level of literacy throughout the country at the close of the nineteenth century was 75% and the reading of the newspaper had moved from public reading rooms to the privacy of the home. According to Dublin Castle, the headquarters of the British administration in Ireland in the nineteenth century, the readers of the provincial press were generally farmers, shopkeepers and labourers.

The focus of the provincial newspaper in Ireland during the nineteenth century, as Legg states, was primarily a local one: "to encourage local commerce through advertisements, publish the affairs of local

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[4] (1996, p. 12)

institutions and publicise local politicians." [5] But the further the reading public was from the capital, the more influential the provincial press.[6] It was, therefore, an important channel of information, particularly about politics, both local and national. Realising the potential impact of the provincial press on its readers, Dublin Castle subscribed to many provincial papers and assessed the influence they had on their readers.

The passing of the Local Government Act in 1898 was an important milestone in the modernisation of the country. Elected councils took over the administration of their own locality. The traditional leadership of landlords was ended as the new middle-class of shopkeepers, publicans and farmers were elected to the new county, urban and rural district councils. Women were entitled to vote for the first time. And the nationalist party became the dominant political organisation in local affairs.

The passing of the Act was a boon for the nationalist provincial press. Legg contends that the papers became "a lever on local affairs" and that editors and proprietors became "leaders and interpreters of opinion and events." [7] In the case of the *Limerick Leader*, whose main news items consisted of detailed reports of local government meetings (council meetings, meetings of Poor Law Guardians, quarter and petty assizes) with editorial comments on these and on politics in general, this contention would appear to be fair and accurate.

Founded in 1888, the Limerick Leader was a tri weekly, four-page newspaper. It cost 1d., was distributed in Limerick, Clare and Tipperary and, according to Dublin Castle figures, had a circulation of 7,000 c. 1892.[8] It was a nationalist newspaper – it supported the Home Rule and land reform movements current at the turn of the nineteenth century- and its readership comprised nationalist gentry, farmers and labourers. Its influence was cited

[5] Legg

[6] also check source – british papers.

[7] Legg

[8] Legg

by the Castle as "bad, inciting to boycotting and intimidation." [9] Its main rival in Limerick was *The Limerick Chronicle*, a conservative, unionist newspaper. The *Leader* was thus a partisan, nationalist newspaper whose primary focus was on politics. But because it was a new newspaper, reflecting the newly empowered nationalist ideology of the day, it challenged the prevailing established authority structures. These included local gentry, the Catholic clergy, and statutory organisations.

Methodology

The method used in this research is content analysis of the most important news pages[10]. The concepts being investigated are the type of coverage, the amount of coverage, the primary content of news stories, the primary sources used, the gender of those sources, proximity, deviance, and the degree of deviance.

- Type refers to whether stories are reported as text alone, visually alone, or text with visuals.

- The amount of coverage is measured in terms of square inches for visuals, and word count for text.

- The primary content of news stories is determined by assigning each story to one of the following categories: politics, business & economics, legal, statutory bodies, world affairs, religious, health & science, media, labour issues, education, weather, sport, lifestyle, celebrity.

- The primary source in news stories is determined by assigning each story to one of the following categories: elected official, business leader, legal authority, sports authority, expert, celebrity, journalist, religious leader, statutory reports, health authority, 'man in the street'.

- The gender of sources is categorised as male or female.

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[9] ibid

[10] Reference needed here to historical dimensions…..

- Proximity is defined as the relative closeness of the news event being reported.

- Deviance is defined as breach of social norms. In this context stories are categorised as falling under one of a range of headings: criminal deviance, social deviance, religious deviance, statistical deviance, or simple quirkiness. In addition the degree of deviance within each category is categorised as being high, medium, or low.

As the *Limerick Leader* in 2000 is only produced in a weekly edition, it was decided to code one issue per week of the 1900 *Leader*, a tri-weekly publication. The front page was chosen from the later set of papers and page 3 from the earlier set, as the front page of newspapers in 1899-1900 was composed entirely of advertising, the major stories being on page 3.

During the coding phase, a systematic random selection of 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 schema outlined above. The results for intercoder reliability using Scott's pi seen in Table 4.

Data & Findings

The analysis yielded a total of 709 stories, 196 from 1999-2000, and 503 from 1899-1900. The breakdown of these stories according to content type is seen is table 1. These data are seen in graphical form in Figure 1. The number of stories is much greater in 1899-1900 than in 1999-2000, by a ratio of 5:2. This is due in part to font size and layout, which will be dealt with later. The distribution of stories is also of interest. From 1899-1900 politics (25%), legal (15%), and business (10%) account for half the stories. The following century, however, is different with legal (19%), business (11%), media (10%) and lifestyle (10%) accounting for half the stories.

The mean size of the stories, in square inches, by century is represented graphically in Figure 2, and by content type and century in Figure

3. The mean size of stories in the earlier century was 13 sq. ins with 20 sq. ins being the average in the later century. These figures should be regarded with caution, however, as font sizes and layouts significantly alter the result. A typical paragraph in 1899-1900 would be 166 words in length; a paragraph of identical size a century later was 85 words in length. This ratio of 2:1 has to be borne in mind for all size and story count issues.

Using the weighted size of stories, it is clear that politics, legal, and world affairs, are given more coverage in 1899-1900 than is 1999-2000, whereas the opposite is true of sport, celebrity, and health & science. The other categories are broadly similar. Running t-tests for comparison of means for size on the categories yields the results shown in Table 3. While the mean difference in legal stories is 10 sq. ins, it is not sufficient for significance. No mean difference can be computed for world affairs since there is no mention of this at all in 1999-2000.

In relation to use of graphics, illustrations and photographs, there is a clear difference between the two periods that extends beyond technical capabilities. The earlier century is entirely devoid of illustrations and relies completely on text. In 1999-2000, there are 72 photographs and illustrations as compared to 124 articles. The photographs and illustrations have a mean size of 13 sq. ins. compared to the articles which have a mean size of 23 sq. ins.

The gender of sources was also coded. This was not identifiable in the earlier period but had significant outcomes in 1999-2000. The results are presented in graphical form in Figure 5. In every case, with the exception of Arts and Celebrity stories, male sources significantly outnumber female sources.

In Figure 6 there is a representation of a dramatic difference between the centuries in relation to the proximity of sources to Limerick, the place of publication for the paper. In 1899-1900, stories dealt with issues from a much greater range of geographical locations, including the wider Munster region, Ireland as a whole, the UK, Europe, Africa and the US. By

1999 this has entirely changed to a preponderance of stories (about 97%) focusing solely on the Limerick region.

Discussion

Different trends in news content are clearly evident in both centuries.

Politics is the most significant news element in 1899-1900. But the *Leader* was a nationalist paper with a nationalist agenda. Consequently, its editorials were regularly political, especially following the reunification of the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster under the leadership of John Redmond in 1900. As Home Rule was a priority for the IPP, national and British politics were addressed by the *Leader* which was openly supportive of Home Rule.

The Local Government Act of 1898 was still a novelty in 1899-1900. The act had invested new powers in local authorities and the direct reports of these meetings were carried by the paper in full. All local improvement schemes - tramways, provision of electricity under the Shannon Electrical Scheme, railways, labour issues – came under the auspices of the local government authorities and were therefore dealt with in a political framework. As the Labour party had a majority on the Limerick City Council, labour issues were regularly on the order of business at council meetings and were carried as political reports.

There was no other source for these reports in 1899-1900, short of attending the actual meetings. This is in direct contrast to 1999-2000 when reports of meetings are available from a variety of sources. Consequently, reports are not currently carried verbatim including "hear, hear"; "loud groans" and "laughter". This was also true of national politics. In 1899-1900, the provincial paper was usually the only source of national political news and commentary. And Westminster was the then centre of non-local political activity.

This trend is borne out in the coverage of world affairs. The *Leader* today makes no mention of world news as it is more quickly available from other sources. But in 1899-1900, extensive reports from the Boer War in Africa were carried. Aside from the reports on battles, victories and defeats, editorials regularly featured commentary on the progress of the war. The pro-Boer, anti-imperialist Britain nature of these editorials fitted well with the nationalist ethos of the *Leader* at the time. This anti-British stance did not carry over into sport however, and the racing results from Britain were carried in almost every edition.

The difference in the coverage of celebrities appears from the t-test scores to be significant. There **is** more coverage of celebrities in 1999-2000. But in 1899-1900, many reports of funerals are categorised as "other" stories. While the dead person in these reports is rarely a "celebrity" or even a prominent business or political leader, the reports carry listings of locally prominent individuals who attended the funeral. While the notion of celebrity does not appear to have changed over time, the actions of celebrities or at least, the manner in which they are reported, seems to have altered.

There is no doubt that the context into which the local, provincial paper fits is radically different in 1899-1900 and 1999-2000. The immediacy of news was not an issue for the *Leader* in 1899-1900. Reports from correspondents were often held over until the next issue due to space constraints. Breakdown in telegraph and wire services led to apologies that war or Westminster reports or race results were not carried as expected. But the *Leader* was not competing with radio or television or the world-wide-web.

The development of these alternate news sources has meant a significant change for newspapers, both provincial and national. At the time of the Boer War, delays of several weeks were common in reporting of events. Today, of course, such reporting is immediate. When John F. Kennedy was assassinated the vast majority of the people heard the news either via radio or from an immediate neighbour who had heard it on radio. The development of twenty-four hour a day television news coverage in the decades since then

has further eroded the news significance of newspapers. The death of Diana Windsor was reported in a worldwide newsflash within minutes of the accident in Paris.

The absence of other news sources is the most obvious reason for the difference between 1899-1900 and 1999-2000 in relation to the proximity of sources to Limerick. This has already been referred to in the case of Westminster politics and the Boer War. Market reports from Munster were regularly carried and the prices on the Dublin Stock Exchange featured in every edition. But it is not the only reason. Because the paper was circulated in three counties, statutory reports from Clare and Tipperary were common in the *Leader*. The paper, in this instance, **was** in competition with other provincial papers for readership.

The *Leader* in 1899-1900 was not a visually attractive newspaper. It was tightly crammed full of closely typed print. Illustrations were not common in newspapers during this period - the *New York Journal* only introduced illustrations in 1898 – and newsprint was expensive. As the primary source of news, the emphasis was less on presentation than on content. The Leader in the 21st century is a markedly different paper. It now costs £1 compared with the 1d of the previous century, a 240-fold increase. Its sphere of influence is much less due to competition: the *Leader* has become a truly regional paper, devoted solely to the interests of Limerick city and county. In terms of design and layout, it is a full colour paper with several sections covering areas such as property, lifestyle and entertainment listings.

The emphasis on these areas, particularly on lifestyle, signify the greatest change in the content of the newspaper. The preponderance of stories devoted to lifestyle, health and science and sport in 1999-2000 certainly reflect the popular culture of the 20th and 21st centuries. Again this change must be placed in the context of both times. Politics was the all-encompassing issue of 1899-1900. It affected areas which would not normally come under a local political ambit. In contemporary Limerick, local politicians

are devoid of real power. That power is now exercised centrally in Dublin. Paradoxically, as the centre of political power moved nearer to Limerick, actual power in the hands of local politicians diminished. The social and ideological climate has changed in Limerick over the centuries and this has a consequent bearing on news content and newspaper focus.

The same can be said of the framers of news, in particular the editors of both editions of the *Leader*. Their function has altered. In 1899-1900, the editor was an influential figure locally and a moulder of public opinion. Editorials regularly criticised and debated with the other powerful elites of the time – politicians, clergymen, poor law guardians and members of the legal profession. This is in complete contrast to the editor of today who has to compete with other media, and whose role is greatly diminished. The editor in the 21st century is no longer of the elite, but rather just another businessman.

To some extent, these changes are to be expected. But what is unexpected is the primacy of the patriarchal society in the news sources. This may appear clearly only in the 1999-2000 *Leader* where male sources predominate, as the sources for the 1899-1900 newspaper are unattributed. But all the local leaders of the time, including the editor of the Leader, were male and they were the sources of news. Despite the significant social advances made by women in the 20th century, there is little evidence of this reflected in the sources of stories across a century.

In contemporary society the role of the newspaper is to offer analysis and commentary. Such analysis is often limited to a wealth of detail that the electronic media cannot deliver due to constraints of time and space. A changed society is reflected through the contemporary stories of 1899-1900 and 1999-2000. Yet, throughout the same forces predominate in representing sectional interests. It is the emphasis which has changed and this change reflects the diminished power and influence of the local newspaper rather than a fundamental change in the sources of news.

Leader in two centuries

In summation then, it is clear that the newspaper of 1900 is at once similar to and different from the newspaper of 2000. While the focus of the paper has changed, it continues to reflect the interests of the powerful, most notably business and commercial interests. It is, however, a much less powerful voice with a somewhat restricted geographical sphere of influence, due in no small part to social, historical, and technological changes. Such changes have meant greatly increased competition for the provincial press and the necessity of an altogether different focus for survival. The Leader has had such a change in focus, becoming exclusively regional in outlook. But such a refocusing has not been accompanied by a change in analytical evaluation of the society it serves. This is possibly best exemplified by the sustained patriarchal nature of the newspaper.

Tables & Figures

Table 1 Number of Stories by Content type by Century

Content type	1899-1900	1999-2000	Combined
politics	127	18	145
business or economics	53	22	75
legal	76	37	113
sport	49	16	65
lifestyle	3	19	22
celebrity	6	18	24
world affairs	45		45
religious	11	6	17
health or science	8	17	25
media	12	20	32
labour issues	34	4	38
education	9	8	17
weather	2	5	7
statutory bodies	38	2	40
Arts	9	4	13
Other	31		31

Table 2 Size of Stories (Weighted) by Content type by Century

Content type	1899-1900	1999-2000
politics	29.72	12.72
business or economics	18.64	22.95
legal	30.34	21.7
sport	14	21.44
lifestyle	18	18.95
celebrity	5.66	18.22
world affairs	49.52	0
religious	25.82	21.33
health or science	10.26	24.65
media	16	20.85
labour issues	29.18	32.5
education	16.88	15
weather	9	9.6
statutory bodies	24.16	24.5
Arts	23.34	20.5

Table 3 Independent samples T-Test outcomes on mean size according to content

Content type	T-value	Significance
politics	4.3	>.001
business or economics	-1.06	ns
legal	1.1	ns
sport	-2.01	>.05
lifestyle	-0.07	ns
celebrity	-3.2	>.01
world affairs	N/A	N/A
religious	.45	ns
health or science	-2.3	>.05
media	-0.06	ns
labour issues	-0.19	ns
education	0.31	ns
weather	0.09	ns
statutory bodies	-0.09	ns
Arts	0.248	ns

Table 4 Intercoder reliability for coded variables using Scott's Pi.

Story type   =
Story date   =
Story size   =
Story content   =
Story source   =
Source gender   =
Proximity   =
Deviance   =
                  =

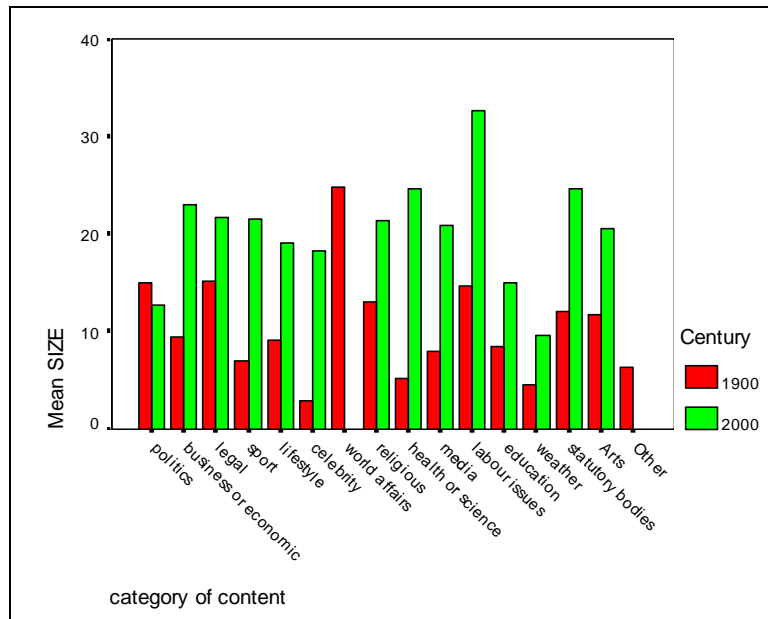**Figure 1 Content type by Century**
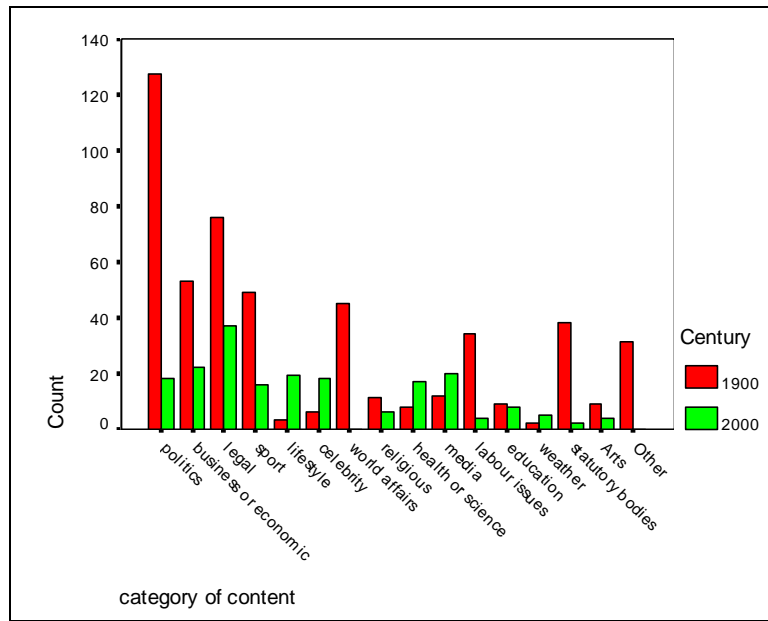
Figure 2 Mean Size of Stories by Century
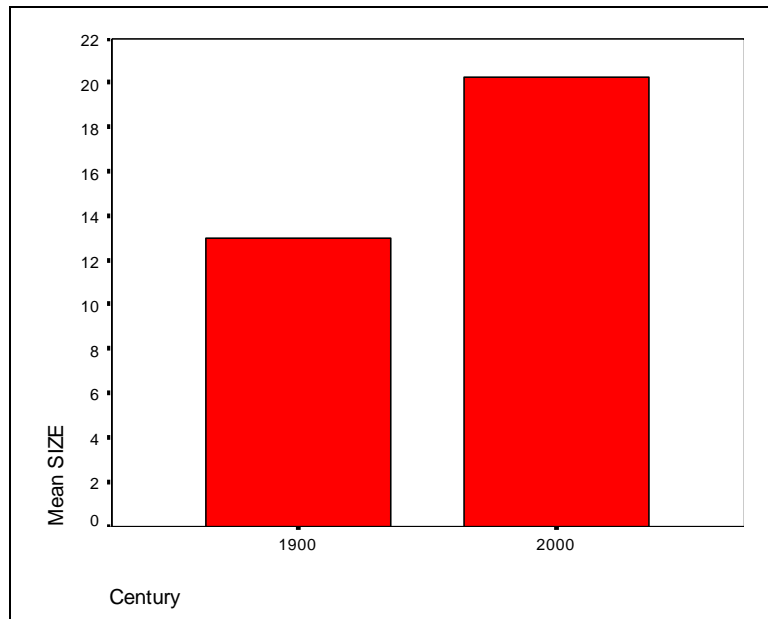
Figure 3 Mean Size of Stories by Content Type by Century

Figure 4 Mean Weighted Size of Stories by Content Type by Century
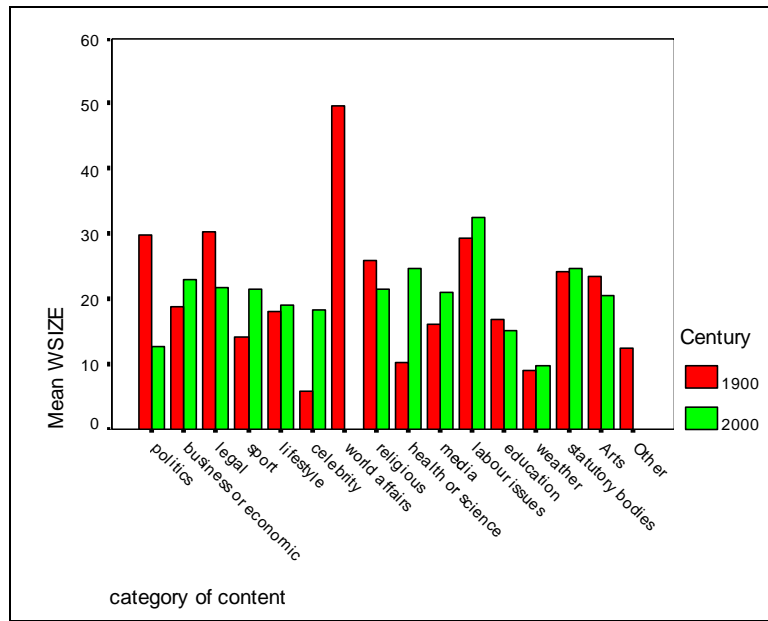
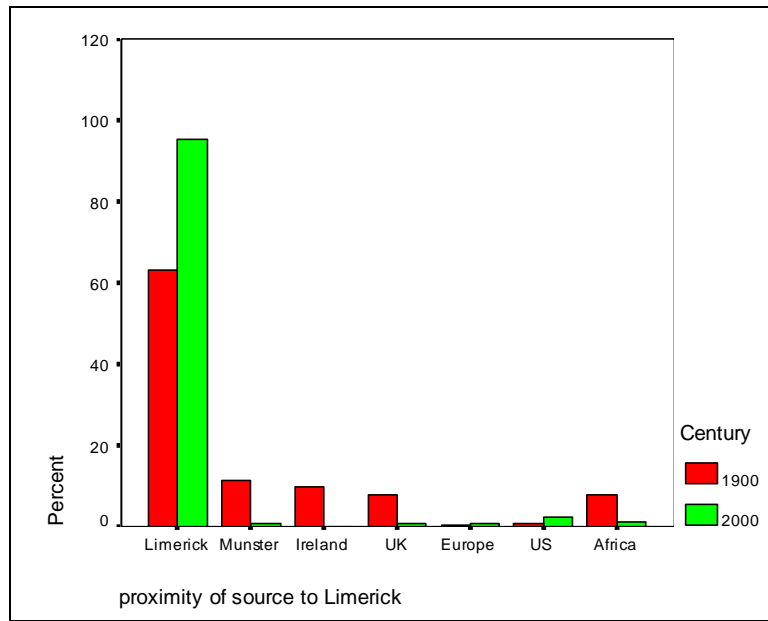**Figure 5 Story type by Source Gender (1999-2000 only)**
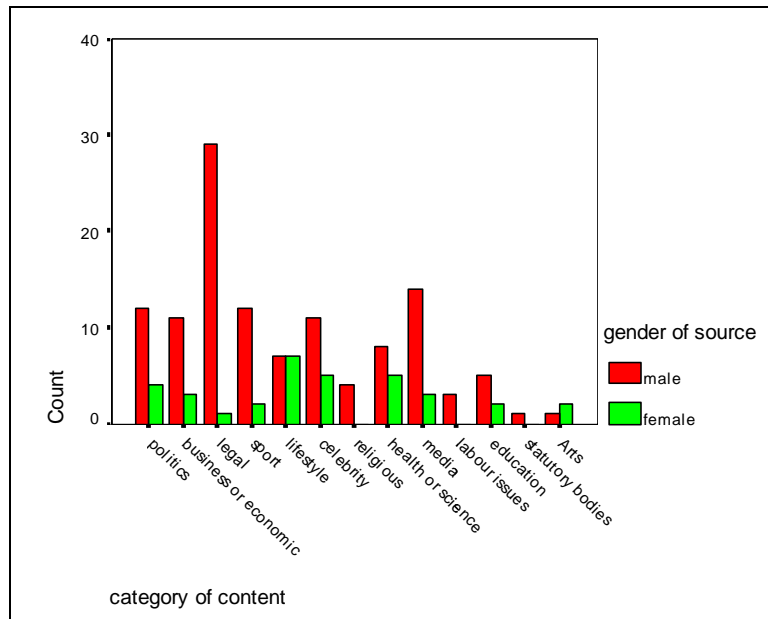
Figure 6 Percentage of stories by Proximity by Century

Figure 7 Number of Deviance Stories by Type of Deviance by Century