

International expansion of the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) curricular evaluation program

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Abstract

Eight journalism educational programs outside the United States are certified by the U.S.-based Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. A survey of journalism undergraduate program directors in the United States indicated that many respondents see opportunities for expanding this voluntary curriculum evaluation and endorsement as a way of spreading U.S. values, in particular to countries lacking press freedoms. However, other respondents worry about the cultural imperialism of imposing U.S. cultural norms and practices on those in other countries. And, some directors questioned the ability to apply standards equitably across all programs, in countries with different political and cultural environments. The results indicated a

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lack of consensus and the need for a thorough discussion about Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's role in promoting journalism education and practice around the globe and what forms that education should take.

Keywords

Accreditation, Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, curriculum, journalism education, undergraduate

Introduction

The institution of journalism, broadly conceived, is important in cultures around the globe, in part because it is connected to the commonly held human need for awareness beyond one's direct experience (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). However, the practice of journalism finds different expressions across cultures (see Hanitzsch, 2007, 2011; Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Hanitzsch et al., 2011, 2019). In recent years, an increasing number of journalism and mass communication programs outside the United States have voluntarily shaped their curricula in adherence to standards set by the U.S.-based Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). This movement toward internationalization has sparked debate over whether all programs certified by ACEJMC should be expected to uphold American standards—especially with regard to issues of press freedom—or whether they should be responsive to the cultures of the institutions pursuing accreditation. This is not merely a philosophical debate. The following situation illustrates the challenges of one faculty member in an institution officially recognized by ACEJMC.

A few years ago, the late American academic Matt J. Duffy (2012a; Kerns, 2018) was abruptly dismissed from his journalism teaching post at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi and his visa was revoked. Reports indicated that the order for Duffy's dismissal did not come from the university, where he had received positive evaluations (2012b), but rather from the state security forces (Nelson, 2012). Duffy (2012c) speculated his dismissal was a result of his writings and other activities related to the promotion of press freedom. 'I was going out on a limb. I felt like I had a duty as an academic in a country where I was told to teach according to international standards', Duffy told *Newsweek* (Schlanger, 2014).

One set of international standards guiding Zayed University's program was articulated by ACEJMC, to which the program was applying for accreditation at that time (Duffy, 2013) and received in 2014. Duffy took comfort in those standards when he began writing for the *Gulf News* about journalism issues and the social media-fueled Arab Spring, which was at its zenith. 'I knew I was operating close to the edge of acceptable boundaries', wrote Duffy (2013: 4). 'But I felt

what I taught in the classroom and said publicly fit within acceptable discourse and the duty of a communications academic—certainly an academic at an institution applying for ACEJMC accreditation’.

Recent years have seen increased calls for sharing best practices for journalism and mass communication programs globally, while also keeping in mind local contextual applications (e.g., UNESCO, 2013). However, Duffy’s experience is illustrative of a series of ongoing debates about the international expansion by ACEJMC. This push has raised discussion about both the cultural imperialism of imposing American standards on programs outside the United States, the appropriateness of extending American-style accreditation to programs in countries that lack protections for a free press, and what it means to apply standards fairly to U.S. and international programs. Thus, the purpose of this study was to reflect on the considerations and ramifications of expansion of a curricular evaluation program by a U.S.-based organization in other countries. Therefore, a sample of journalism undergraduate program directors in the United States were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with international expansion of ACEJMC. The results indicated a lack of consensus and the need for a thorough discussion about the pros and cons of international expansion.

Literature review

ACEJMC’s American roots . . . and branching out

ACEJMC is entrenched in U.S. journalism culture. It was founded in 1945 as the American Council on Education in Journalism before adopting its current name in 1980 (for a more in-depth overview of the development of ACEJMC see: Blom, Bowe and Davenport, 2019; Blom and Davenport, 2012; Blom, Davenport and Bowe, 2012; Christ and Henderson, 2014; Cusatis and Martin-Kratzer 2010; Henderson and Christ, 2014; Seamon, 2010; Whitmore, 2004; Workman, 1988). ACEJMC is one of many nongovernmental organizations in the United States that have been acknowledged as authoritative bodies in setting and evaluating standards to ensure quality in a field, discipline, or industry—a process referred to as accreditation in the U.S. system of higher education. This arrangement may differ from laws and regulations in other countries where accreditation, certification, or benchmark reports are the result of work done by agencies or councils within a more formal government structure. Because ACEJMC is not affiliated with the government, it is not prevented from evaluating journalism education programs outside the United States, which explains the organization’s international reach.

ACEJMC accreditation was U.S.-only until Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile received an ACEJMC stamp of approval in 1997. Programs outside of the United States have been recommended for accreditation for more than two decades, but most notably from 2014 to 2016. As of March 2020, there were 112 programs with full accreditation status and five with provisional status, which comprises about a quarter of all journalism undergraduate programs in the United States,

as listed in the ACEJMC Directory (ACEJMC, 2020). Eight institutions with accredited journalism programs are outside of the United States: three in the United Arab Emirates (American University in Dubai, University of Sharjah, and Zayed University); two in Mexico (Anahuac University and Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey) and one each in New Zealand (Massey University), Chile (Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile), and Qatar (Qatar University). At least one other international institution, Kuwait University, was visited as part of an ACEJMC pre-accreditation review more than a decade ago, but has not pursued a full evaluation (Elon University, 2007).

To reflect the international membership of accredited programs, the Council's logo now includes a globe, primarily featuring the North and South American continents, and the organization revised language in its standards, values, and competencies. However, some language remained unchanged, reflecting its U.S. origins. For example, in its Objectives and Purposes of Accreditation section, ACEJMC (n.d.) continued to address the First Amendment and the U.S. Constitution: 'From the beginnings of our democratic society, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has provided guarantees of free press and free speech. These freedoms have enabled journalism and mass communications to become important, powerful components of American democracy'. Additionally, in its explanation of the evaluation process ('The Process of Accreditation'), the body's committee and council are described as 'The national Accrediting Committee' and 'The national Accrediting Council'.

The website specifies that eligibility requirements are similar for all programs despite the nation in which they are located:

ACEJMC will evaluate only those international programs that are recognized by U.S.-based accrediting organizations and/or the appropriate governmental and non-governmental quality assurance entities in that country or region. ACEJMC will notify the appropriate governmental and nongovernmental quality assurance agencies of the unit's intent to seek review and will invite their comments. (ACEJMC, 2017)

ACEJMC traditionally focused on a program's curriculum and resources, such as faculty and facilities, when making accrediting decisions. Over time, diversity (e.g., faculty, students, and awareness of inclusiveness) and assessment of student outcomes have emerged as major foci, representing two of the nine standards the organization uses to evaluate programs. On one hand, it is unclear how emphasis on U.S.-centric conceptualizations of diversity (domestic or otherwise) extends into the international arena. On the other hand, virtually no international representation appears at ACEJMC's administrative level. As of March 2020, the three-person Executive Committee is made up of representatives of U.S. education and press institutions. All members of the Accrediting Committee and the Accrediting Council represent a variety of U.S.-based industry groups, professional societies, and educational organizations and institutions.

Western-centric journalism development

In the attempt to improve journalism globally, we might project that academic and journalist John Herbert (2005: 34) would disagree with the notion that non-Western journalism programs should be judged by Western media standards and cultural ideology, such as ACEJMC, when he wrote the following:

The education offered to journalists in, for example, Europe or the United States should not become a travelling package deal for the Asia Pacific, the Middle East or South Asia. Journalism as practiced in developing countries can and should have different foundations and functions that are shaped by different political philosophies that make those countries what they are.

Recent years have brought recommendations to de-Westernize journalism education (e.g., WJEC, n.d.). In response to these calls, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) developed a generic model for journalism education, which recommends a program curriculum and specific readings, exercises, and assignments for individual courses that can be adapted for individual countries' needs. Dozens of institutions in almost as many countries, including Iraq and Myanmar, adopted the recommendations (e.g., Chua, 2014; Pavlik et al., 2012). The UNESCO model and similar attempts have been deemed laudable efforts to improve journalism around the world, particularly in developing countries as a way to create opportunities for people's self-governance. However, the one-size-fits-all approaches are most likely ineffective and recommendations to 'others' sometimes overlook problems with one's 'own' educational approaches and realities (Claussen, 2007).

Thus, the UNESCO model is not without limitations, and some have argued that it applies a Western-centric view to nations with different ideologies and conventions. For instance, Freedman and Shafer (2010: 135) noted the UNESCO model overlooks 'perhaps-insurmountable obstacles and problems that will invariably arise when poor countries, authoritarian countries, and countries with strong cultural and religious constraints on "democratic journalism" go about the process of implementing the model, in whole or in part'. They suggested that models of journalism education are not universally applicable because of variations among national, social, economic, political, and cultural contexts, including countries that are categorized as repressitarian—repressive in human rights practices and authoritarian governance, employing sophisticated censorship methods to hinder the free flow of information (see Freedman et al., 2010; Bowe, Freedman, and Blom, 2012). Freedman and Shafer (2010: 136–137) also pointed out that the ability to teach the UNESCO curriculum cannot flourish as intended in many countries because they lack the following: (1) qualified faculty; (2) students with the necessary prior educational training; (3) administrative structures; (4) potential entry-level jobs for graduates; (5) computer and other technological equipment; (6) instructional materials in official national languages or local

dialects; and (7) financial resources. They echoed Tunstall (1977) who stated that the earlier attempts by UNESCO to create media development models with ‘an American-dominated view was unrealistic and even absurd’.

Five years after releasing the journalism curriculum, UNESCO (2013) responded with a thorough compendium that included additional syllabi to cover new ground based on emerging issues in news production and consumption. It also provided the opportunity to present evaluations based on adoptions of the model curriculum in dozens of countries and additional clarification of the contextual applications of the model with a continued emphasis on freedom of expression. Similar to the original report, UNESCO emphasized its focus on best practices and purposefully left out references to standardized accreditation.

The importance of international perspectives

Major academic organizations in the field acknowledge the importance of global engagement. For example, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC, 2008) wrote in its strategic plan that it ‘must Engage Globally and Multiculturally’ through ‘international and multicultural teaching, research and service’. Within that global engagement, AEJMC particularly emphasizes the promotion of ‘global free expression and deep democracy’.

The International Communication Association (ICA, n.d.) elaborates in its statement of principles the aim ‘to facilitate inclusiveness and debate among scholars from diverse national and cultural backgrounds and from multi-disciplinary perspectives on communication-related issues’. However, when it comes to promulgating a particular vision of communication, ICA wrote that international diversity ‘requires some caution in the specific application of broad ethical principles’, noting that such guidelines ‘should be sensitive to institutional, legal, and cultural contexts that may vary among nations and regions’ and ‘are sometimes best negotiated within national or regional organizations’.

The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) was established under the auspices of UNESCO, and it maintains a formal relationship with the United Nations. As such, the organization’s internationalized mission is baked into its structure. One of the organization’s main goals is ‘to seek to improve media and communication research, policy and practice, especially from international and interdisciplinary perspectives, and to exchange information on practices and conditions that would improve the quality of media and communication practice and media and communication research’ (IAMCR, 2012).

Debates among stakeholders about increasing the quality and effectiveness of journalism education, and the role of evaluation by external entities are not exclusive to the United States. These same issues resonate with those trying to improve journalism training around the globe, such as in Australia (Cullen, 2014; Hirst, 2010; Tanner et al., 2013), Ireland (French, 2007), New Zealand (Hannis, 2012), and the United Kingdom (Canter, 2015). Several countries in the European Union

and South Africa created their own journalism education evaluation bodies based on ACEJMC's assessment structure and policies (Deuze, 2006), while others chose different types of structures.

Some media organizations have ignored the good intentions of accreditation bodies. For instance, Canter (2015: 2) interviewed editors at a variety of media organizations in the United Kingdom, including the *BBC*, *BuzzFeed*, *ITN News*, *Sky Sports News*, and *The Guardian*, and found that any type of journalism education evaluation is largely 'not a factor in the employment of entry level journalists'. Employers who factored in accreditation as part of the hiring process indicated that it is desirable, but not essential. Close to half of the working journalists in the U.K. earned a degree from higher education programs accredited by the industry's largest evaluation body, the National Council for Training of Journalists (NCTJ). Only one study participant specifically mentioned training at an institution with NCTJ-accredited courses and another respondent noted that courses accredited by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) were a desired background for potential hires. Other study participants did not name any accrediting body in the journalism field.

Several international attempts to improve journalism education in a collective of countries or among international organizations stop short of an enforceable accreditation system. For example, the European Journalism Training Association (EJTA) was created in 1990 by about 70 journalism centers, schools, and universities from about 30 countries. This association has organized conferences and seminars to discuss important issues affecting journalists. EJTA also established standards on how journalists should serve the public, and encourages journalism education programs to train their students in all of the areas outlined by the association. Member organizations agree to train their students based on several competencies, including understanding journalism's role in society, finding relevant news issues and angles, organizing journalistic work, gathering information swiftly, selecting essential information, presenting information in an effective journalistic form, accounting for journalist work, cooperating in teams, acting as entrepreneurial journalists, and contributing to the renewal of the profession. Although it is not an official accreditation or certification program with site teams to check on self-studies and enforce members to live up to their promises, its guidelines were formalized in the Tartu Declaration in 2006 and revised seven years later (EJTA, n.d.).

Another example of an organization trying to improve journalism education worldwide is the World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC), whose first meeting produced the World Journalism Education Council's Declaration of Principles. The resulting inaugural council drew to its first meeting in 2007 representatives from 28 journalism education associations from six continents and identified 11 standards for journalism education worldwide. Follow-up meetings exchanged teaching methods and discussions surrounding international journalism education topics. Accreditation has been a prominent thread of discussion throughout the conferences (WJEC, 2013). At the 2016 meeting in New Zealand, one of the

discussion groups ('syndicates') composed of professors, industry professionals, and active members of ACEJMC and AEJMC recommended a blended system of accreditation for quality assurance with common outcomes for journalism education around the world—and measures leading to an international accreditation system (WJEC, 2016). The 2019 meeting continued the conversation on best practices of assessing and accrediting journalism programs, but the recommendations focused solely on the former (WJEC, 2019).

It is with this global backdrop that ACEJMC operates. The organization's international expansion is in the hands of its members and staff. As the overwhelming majority of its accredited programs are in the United States, it is important to gauge whether those members support such international expansion. Therefore, this study examines the following research question: To what extent do undergraduate journalism program directors agree or disagree with international expansion of ACEJMC?

Method

An email list was created from information in the annual membership book of the AEJMC (not to be confused with ACEJMC). Department chairs and/or undergraduate program directors were identified and invited to participate in an online survey. Potential respondents received an invitation, emailed in June 2016, with a link to a digital questionnaire hosted on the servers of a survey vendor affiliated with the lead author's institution. All participants received an email eight days later, thanking participants and politely reminding others to complete the survey.

A total of 365 undergraduate program directors and department chairpersons (depending on whether an undergraduate program director was identified in their entries in the AEJMC program guide) received a survey and 129 opened the survey, which resulted in a 36% response rate. Five people did not answer any questions and seven respondents indicated that their institution only offered a minor in journalism, not a major. That left a sample of 118 who proceeded with the survey, which corresponds with a 33% response rate. The items analyzed for this article were a final section of a longer survey on journalism education. Survey fatigue may have caused a drop-off of participants toward the end of the questionnaire. A group of 90 people completed the question block on accreditation. That led to a 25% response rate for the accreditation questions, which is still in line with generally acceptable survey response rates.

Twenty-two participants, 26% of the respondents, who filled out the accreditation measures were employed at ACEJMC-accredited schools. Participants were further asked to identify their school affiliation according to its Carnegie Commission on Higher Education classification: 47% were employed at doctoral universities, with most of them at an R1 institution (20% of the total sample); 33% represented master's degree-granting institutions, while the rest were at baccalaureate-awarding colleges or similar types of institutions. Programs ranged in size from 15 to more than 1,000 students, as indicated by the

respondents, yet in some cases this included students in public relations, advertising, and other related majors who were part of their respective journalism schools or departments.

Within a survey on undergraduate journalism curriculum and ACEJMC accreditation status, the respondents were asked their opinion about the Council's international expansion:

In the past few years, ACEJMC has expanded further internationally. Several international institutions (located in Chile, Mexico, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates) are currently accredited. Do you agree or disagree that such international expansion is a desired development?

Participants indicated their opinion on a 5-point scale and could elaborate in a text box.

The study design and participation protocol were approved by the IRB office of the home institution of the lead author with certification documentation from coauthors.

Results

The survey participants were asked if they thought that international expansion of the ACEJMC curricular evaluation program was desirable. The response category chosen most often was the neutral option (neither agree nor disagree, 46%), while almost an equal number strongly agreed or agreed (41%) and a smaller number disagreed with expansion (13%).

Of those who disagreed with the need for international expansion, 2.3% strongly disagreed and 10.3% were somewhat against it. Of those who liked the idea of international expansion, 24.1% were strongly in favor and 17.2% were somewhat agreeable.¹

More than half of the participants explained their response. Many program directors considered international expansion a positive development. A few respondents looked inward to the envisioned benefits for their programs. For example, a respondent noted that as international graduate program enrollment has increased for many U.S. programs, it 'would be helpful to know that their undergraduate program is accredited'. Another participant wrote that international accreditation might help to identify potential study abroad destinations for U.S. students.

More than a dozen respondents noted the reality that journalism is not limited to national borders ('Journalism like everything else has gotten more global') and that journalism education should reflect that reality ('Could us help form partnerships'). Respondents wrote that the accreditation program might also be a positive tool to spread 'U.S. journalistic values', 'free expression', and 'technological currency' at international institutions. However, one participant cautioned that ACEJMC accreditation 'can be a force for cultural imperialism'.

Another respondent, who chose a neutral stance, liked the idea of international evaluation standards ('We can learn from their experiences as much as they can from ours'), but was also wary that 'what is applicable in [the] USA is not always applicable in other parts [of the world] and vice versa'.

Some commented on why they were skeptical or opposed to the international expansion. A respondent pointed out that ACEJMC standards may differ among countries and thus, 'it is unfair to compare U.S. institutions with others outside the U.S'. Freedom of speech related issues were mentioned eight times. In particular, the political environment in several nations was perceived as a threat to freedom of speech: 'How can they be accredited under ACEJMC? This seems like a double standard'. Another respondent feared that specifically the diversity standard may be undermined in some of the countries. 'Thus, the standards become rather silly'.

Overall, results provided evidence to answer the research question: To what extent do undergraduate journalism program directors agree or disagree with international expansion of ACEJMC? The largest group of respondents was neutral on the matter. The group that agreed on international expansion was more than twice the size of the group that disagreed, although many in support were also cautious for indirect and unintended consequences and drawbacks related to diversity and free speech.

Discussion and conclusions

This study was intended to examine program directors' opinions about expanding the ACEJMC accreditation process beyond the United States. The Council has begun accrediting international journalism programs in the United Arab Emirates, New Zealand, Chile, Mexico, and elsewhere. Non-U.S. expansion might offer a way for ACEJMC to grow the number of accredited programs, if that is a desired path.

It should be noted that 44% of program directors took neutral stances. This is unusual for academics, and merits further investigation as to why. Perhaps the reason is that they are not aware of any ACEJMC discussions and issues about international expansion, whether from the minutes of meetings or from their representatives on the Council. Or perhaps they have not thoroughly rolled around the different ramifications on domestic and international programs.

When considering expanding internationally, three questions generally arise as to how ACEJMC evaluation practices would proceed for all institutions. Would the Council use:

- The current standards for international programs. (Can they be applied equally to all? And is this a good idea, reflecting on the Duffy example?)
- One set of standards for U.S. programs and one set for non-U.S. programs. (And is that fair to all?)
- A newly developed set of ACEJMC guidelines that could encompass all programs globally. (And, is this possible?)

On one hand, extending accreditation to more international programs may provide a much-needed vector for diversity—which research suggests is one of the weakest parts of the current ACEJMC standards (Crawford, 2014; Reinardy and Crawford, 2013). This issue would provide fodder for much discussion because the ACEJMC diversity standard focuses on domestic, not international, inclusion.

On the other hand, entering the rough seas over press freedom would leave programs stuck between the proverbial Scylla and Charybdis by either enforcing U.S. standards globally and inviting charges of cultural imperialism, or making them more culturally flexible and inviting criticism for abandoning time-honored principles. Neither outcome is ideal, but confronting this trade-off head-on seems necessary. Only one respondent mentioned cultural imperialism directly. However, if over time, more journalism educators voice concern, then public and prominent discussions about an accreditation system administered by a non-government entity based in the United States may be needed.

In 2008, the Council formed an ad hoc international committee to provide guidance on responding to increasing inquiries from international programs and guidance in judging domestic programs within unique environments (ACEJMC, 2008, 2009). At that time, the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile was the only School of Journalism to have ACEJMC accreditation outside the United States, although requests for information on ACEJMC's evaluation program from other international institutions were received. The ad hoc committee voiced issues similar to those brought up by program directors in this survey: 'The Council wrestled with how to embrace an international society while preserving its commitment to freedoms of speech and gender equality. Some members saw expansion into international markets as a way to help spread awareness of freedoms of speech practices. There also was some concern that domestic programs would use the language revisions as a way to get around domestic diversity' (ACEJMC, 2009).

A year later, the committee suggested a few general language revisions to address changes in the industry and international interest (2009). Although no other reference to international accreditation is noted in ACEJMC's newsletter to member organizations and schools after 2009, international institutions have been accredited, and one can suppose additional discussions addressing international accreditation have transpired. Public, in-depth conversations would help member schools understand the nature of international curricular evaluation and the potential ramifications to their own programs. And, international accreditation could mean a greater international presence on the Council, changing the dynamics of domestic institutions' evaluations.

Significant language changes about press freedom in ACEJMC's documented accreditation procedures, bylaws, reports, and other external publications might be warranted, as some of the wording pertains to the United States only (e.g., references to the 'First Amendment'). Although protections of free speech exist in many countries, media systems cannot be separated from their cultural contexts. This suggests that a 'one size fits all' approach might not be suitable, as institutions must respond to their nation's laws and codes. As the Reporters Without Borders' World Press

Freedom Index (n.d.) shows, some of the nations where ACEJMC has accredited programs are highly problematic regarding free speech—United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Mexico were outside the Top 100 of countries listed from safest to most dangerous for the press. And as noted in the Committee to Protect Journalists website, at least one of the accredited institutions is in a country listed as one of the top deadliest for journalists, while other lists note countries where journalists have been imprisoned, exiled, or missing.

To help with decision-making, the organization would want to encourage open debate about the appropriateness of ACEJMC's stamp of approval for institutions located in repressetarian societies. Some respondents of this survey indicated that ACEJMC could seize this opportunity (perhaps as its duty) to promote press freedom around the world. Shortly after his dismissal from Zayed University, Duffy wrote on his blog, 'I suspect that having two professors fired by the security forces will put a damper on my former department's chances for accreditation' (2012a, para. 15). But, that turned out not to be the case—Zayed was successful in earning accreditation.

It is an interesting conundrum facing ACEJMC that merits discussion among members. The first issue is to be clear about the reason to expand internationally and a second issue concerns process.

The response rate of the survey was acceptable, but lower than ideal, and the authors learned the limits of survey fatigue for next time. The survey was administered only to representatives of journalism programs in the United States, so opinions of those in international venues are not known. As ACEJMC moves forward, it would also be interesting to garner the helpful opinions of U.S.-based faculty who are experts in international political communication and international press freedom.

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Note

1. Representatives from ACEJMC-accredited institutions were more in favor of international expansion (50%) than the representatives from non-accredited institutions (38%), but the groups were equal in the opposition to expansion (13%). There was no statistically significant difference between the groups: $\chi^2(4, N = 85) = 2.12$, n.s.

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