

Do readers give a *%&# about editing?

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Short answer: Yes

If controlled experiments with repeated-measures ANOVA had not graphs, the nut graf would be:

- Yes. Research participants in a diverse pool of ‘real people’ can tell edited from unedited stories in several consistent and distinct ways
 - If you think something is hasty and amateurish, there’s a good chance readers do, too
- So can we go home yet?
 - No. You might be convinced, but that doesn’t mean the people who hold the purse strings are convinced
 - So let’s start at the beginning

Good news, 2011-style

By several measures, the state of the American news media improved in 2010.

After two dreadful years, most sectors of the industry saw revenue begin to recover. With some notable exceptions, cutbacks in newsrooms eased. ... Some experiments with new revenue models began to show signs of blossoming.

Among the major sectors, only newspapers suffered continued revenue declines. ... When the final tallies are in, we estimate 1,000 to 1,500 more newsroom jobs will have been lost— meaning newspaper newsrooms are 30% smaller than in 2000.

Project for Excellence in Journalism, 'State of the News Media 2011'

That's no longer really 'news'

- Editing cutbacks look justifiable in the glass offices because executives can deflect the damage or point to a better outcome in the future:
 - *Some stories get fewer reads. "We have less of a safety net," she [Julia Wallace, editor of the AJ-C] acknowledges. "But it's also about pushing accountability down."* (Carl Sessions Stepp, CJR)
 - *Executive Editor Marcus Brauchli did not disagree that more errors have appeared lately. But over time, he predicted, a universal desk will be "more effective" in serving print, online and mobile audiences.* (Andy Alexander, former Washington Post ombud)

Some views are less cheery

- *Between early 2005 and mid-2008, the number of full-time copy editors dropped from about 75 to 43 through buyouts or voluntary departures. It has declined further since then, but Post managers won't provide precise figures beyond saying that six took a recent buyout offer.*
- *"By definition, you'll see more errors when there's reduced staffing," said Bill Walsh, the A-section copy desk chief. Today, "there are some shifts where I'm looking at seven or eight people total."*
(Alexander, "Fewer copy editors, more errors," July 2009)

Summary?

- The production-line model of journalism needed consistent and reliable quality control for the same reason other factories did.
 - Not just to head off lawsuits from things that blow up in your face!
 - The model also helped set consumer expectations; you give people a badly made product at your own risk
- That assumption is now directly questioned. We assumed, and our textbooks said, that every little error erodes our credibility. To which the answer is:
 - So what?
 - Not really
 - Compared to what?

Purpose of the study

True story! I was reading e-mail and having a beer on the deck last August when I got a note from Teresa (Schmedding, ACES president)

- Bottom-line issue: Does quality of online editing affect the bottom line? That's hard to measure:
 - Why do people read what they do?
 - Why do people *admit* to reading what they do?
 - What do people like about what they read?
 - What's the relationship between what people say and what they mean?
- But we can measure a set of things that point toward the bottom line: What do audiences think?

A Warren man pled guilty Tuesday to a robbery committed in Sterling Heights, Sterling Heights Police said.

Victor Tony Dickens, 20, pled guilty and was sentenced to three years incarceration, all but 15 months' suspended. A second suspect is still at large.

On August 15, around 7:30 p.m., City police responded to a robbery in front of the Chevy Chase Bank in the 7600 block of Bush Avenue. The victim had used the ATM and while walking to his vehicle he was approached by one of the subjects who demanded his money, police said. A struggle ensued between the subject and victim at which time the subject took the money and fled from the parking lot on to Kirklynn Avenue. There, the subject entered a red Nissan Maxima on the passenger side, which was parked facing the opposite direction on Kirklynn Avenue, and fled on Kirklynn Avenue.

The suspects fled after County Police spotted a red Nissan Maxima that fit the description of the getaway vehicle. One of the suspects exited the vehicle in the Giant parking lot on Arliss Street and grabbed a purse from a woman there. A Sterling Heights Police Officer pursued the subject on foot. The subject fled into the wooded area behind the apartment buildings located on Arliss Street. The driver of the red Nissan Maxima also fled the area. Despite the efforts of Sterling Heights Police, County Police, Police K-9 and State Police, the subjects were not apprehended.

On August 16, at around 2:50pm, a subject matching the description of the robbery suspect, later identified as Dickens, was observed walking in the 200 block of Harlequin Terrace. Dickens was followed to the Exxon Station located at Randolph Road and Columbia Street, in Warren, where he was arrested.

A member of the popular local rock band Parmalee remains in a fight of his life. Parmalee just wrapped up a show near Charlotte, NC when police say two men looking for money tried to rob the band in their RV.

There was a gunfight and the band's drummer Scott Thomas was hurt, he is in critical condition. Two other people were shot; gunman Demario Burris died in the shootout. The shooting has drawn a lot of prayers from the Town of Parmele. And from people who knew the band before they were famous.

News quickly spread roughly 300-miles away from Charlotte in the town where the band got it's name and its start. People in Parmele couldn't hold back there emotions.

"It's how they make their living," said Thomas family friend Norman Williamston. "And something happening like that could of happened to anybody."

But he like many other fans who knew Scott Thomas personally say Thomas wasn't a quitter then...and he's not a quitter now.

Parmalee's been a staple in the North Carolina music scene since the band came together nine years ago. Steadily growing in popularity and touring with some of the biggest acts on the rock concert circuit.

The latest information Channel 9 News has is Thomas remains in critical condition at Memorial Hospital in Charlotte. We'll keep you posted on developments as information becomes available.

Time out for social science!

When you see an AP lede like this, what should you do?

- “Teens whose iPods are full of music with raunchy sexual lyrics start having sex sooner than those who prefer other songs, a study found.”
 - Run the story on the front page
 - Find a file picture of an iPod to dress the story up
 - Ask local teens whether they listen to music, have sex, or both (hi, parents!)
 - Immediately post an online poll
 - All of the above

'All research is about tradeoffs'

... my favorite quote from all those research methods classes

- We can't take a ruler and measure everything in the real world that we want to
 - What's your iPod full of? What does 'full' mean?
 - What's 'raunchy' and what isn't?
 - What does 'prefer' mean? (For that matter, what does 'have sex' mean?)
- Thus, we take concepts – like 'raunchy' or 'violent' or 'degrading' – and produce 'operational' definitions
 - That means we need a set of rules with which almost anybody could plausibly recognize 'raunchy' and 'clean'

‘Within the margin of error ...’

If the other thing you learn today is to never, ever say ‘within the margin of error,’ my work here is done

- Since we can’t examine every iPod or every news article or every registered voter, we take a sample
- ‘Statistical significance’ is an arbitrary level at which we accept that the sample represents the population
 - Traditionally, it’s 95% ($p \leq .05$), or a 5 percent chance that your result is an accident, rather than something real
 - Is that what God ordained at Mt. Sinai? Yes, in exactly the same way as getting a driving license on your 16th birthday
- That’s not the same as ‘practical’ or ‘clinical’ significance, which is what your idea means in real life
 - Don’t forget to report those effect sizes, kids!

For this study, that means ...

- ‘Readers’ are a distinct sample of the whole population – very representative in some ways, less so in others
- ‘Articles’ are a limited number of real news stories (all actually published online) arbitrarily chosen to represent the conditions we’re interested in
- ‘Edited’ is a consensus suggested by people I know (and don’t know) online, along with my own couple of decades of journalism
 - ‘Professional’ is a variable that I think *we* think represents a story that was written up to traditional journalism standards
 - ‘Grammar’ is a crapshoot, but it correlates well (.796)

A few specifics

That means we'll talk about:

- The stimulus material (i.e., 'the stories')
 - 'Ecological validity': These are articles that were published online in ways that reflect the current Web-first, edit later, multi-platform mentality
- The audience
 - Why these students (or any students) make a good sample
- The constructs
 - What 'grammar,' 'professionalism' and 'organization' mean to us – and what they seem to mean to the participants
- And the statistics

The articles

- The mission is to talk about stories published ‘online’
 - Good idea. Whether we like it or not, that’s where news is published and read
 - Not all ‘online’ is equal – but it is all online
- Our particular interest is whether there’s a place for editors in the process, so the conceptual definition was “stuff that reflects a ‘publish first, edit later’ bias”
- Where did the raw material come from?
 - Metro newspapers that run print versions of stories by a television ‘news partner’
 - Broadcasters (local or national) that let producers write
 - Patch.com

The readers

'Undergraduates at a major midwestern university ...'

- Participants (n = 66) in the experiment were mostly drawn from a new subject pool at WSU
- Is it bad to study human behavior using undergrads?
 - Undergraduates are poor substitutes for flag-rank officers, but they're really good at acting like real people
 - Multivariate effects aren't the same as voting preference
- This population is different
 - Ethnically and linguistically diverse
 - Older and more 'first-generation'
- In other words, these folks are the people whose eyes we'll be trying to sell to advertisers

Scales and measurements

Please don't tell Gov. Palin that we say 'manipulation'!

- I took the raw stories and applied some basic copy editing to them
 - The goal was to have 9 articles in 'edited' and 'unedited' conditions, in case one needed to be replaced
 - One did (Lebanon), so we ended up with 8
 - Each participant saw 4 'edited' and 4 'unedited' articles
- After each article, participants answered a set of questions on 7-point ('Likert-type') scales
 - These scales sought to capture the markers of good editing that editors had suggested
 - Thus, we can more or less put together some things that make up 'editing'

The science of double-bagging

That was a **GREAT** story!

Disagree Neutral Agree
[] [] [] [] [] [] []

- If we ask a question like that, we get what we paid for
- So it's better to ask a bunch of questions that try to get at the same big idea: Three or four scales that we can later turn into one big conceptual scale
 - Factor analysis
 - Scale reliability
- In effect, the dependent variables work better because they're double-bagged for strength!

Three measures of editing

- Professionalism ($\alpha = .913$)
 - This story sounds like it was written professionally
 - This story looks like it was written in a hurry
 - This is the kind of story I expect from a serious news organization
 - I like the way this story is written
 - There are a lot of mistakes in this story
- Organization ($\alpha = .846$)
 - Something important is missing from this story
 - It's hard to tell what the writer is trying to say
 - This story has the right tone for what it's trying to do
- Grammar ($\alpha = .796$)
 - This story doesn't always use the right words ...
 - This story isn't consistent in how it talks about people and things
 - This story uses poor grammar

And the statistics

- This is a 'mixed design' study
 - Editing is a 'within subjects' variable: Everybody gets 4 edited stories and 4 unedited stories
 - Gender, news use, etc. are 'between subjects' variables
- A 'T test' compares the averages of two things that produce similar averages and their significance
 - Is the edited version of Story 1 rated higher or lower than the unedited version of Story 1, *and is that difference real?*
- A slightly hairier version of average-testing is called 'analysis of variance' (ANOVA)
- 'Effect sizes' tell you how much of the outcome is explained by what you measured

Demographics: Your readers

- 66 participants
- 58% women, 42% men
- Average age, 22.77; median age, 21
- A little less than half white (47%)
 - Black, 24%; South Asian, 12%; Latino, 8%
- English is the most common home language (77%)
 - 14 other languages among ‘language spoken at home’
- About 56% spend less than an hour a day getting the news
- About 60% spend 3 hours or more a day on the Web
- Most (53%) get their news from ‘the Internet’

Yes, editing matters

These tests measure everyone's response to all edited and unedited stories. Lower numbers are better. They're reported with significance and effect size

- Professionalism: edited, 16.088; unedited, 17.661
 - $p = .007$, $d = .41$
- Organization: 14.758 to 15.707
 - $p = .083$, $d = .25$
- Grammar: 14.606 to 16.353
 - $p = .001$, $d = .49$
- Those are generally considered moderate effect sizes, with little likelihood the results happened by chance

Group comparisons

Editing influences the variables differently when we look at it in subgroups of the population, and we get some 'interaction' effects too

- There's a philosophical stance in some corners of journalism (and the academy) that there's no such thing as a 'black view' of news.
- A better way to look at it is that everybody shares the same facts, but the way those facts are ordered (or omitted, or processed) isn't universal
- We don't have to like it if Those Kids spend all day in on the Interwebs, but if we want to talk about what they think about news, we'd better look

Gender

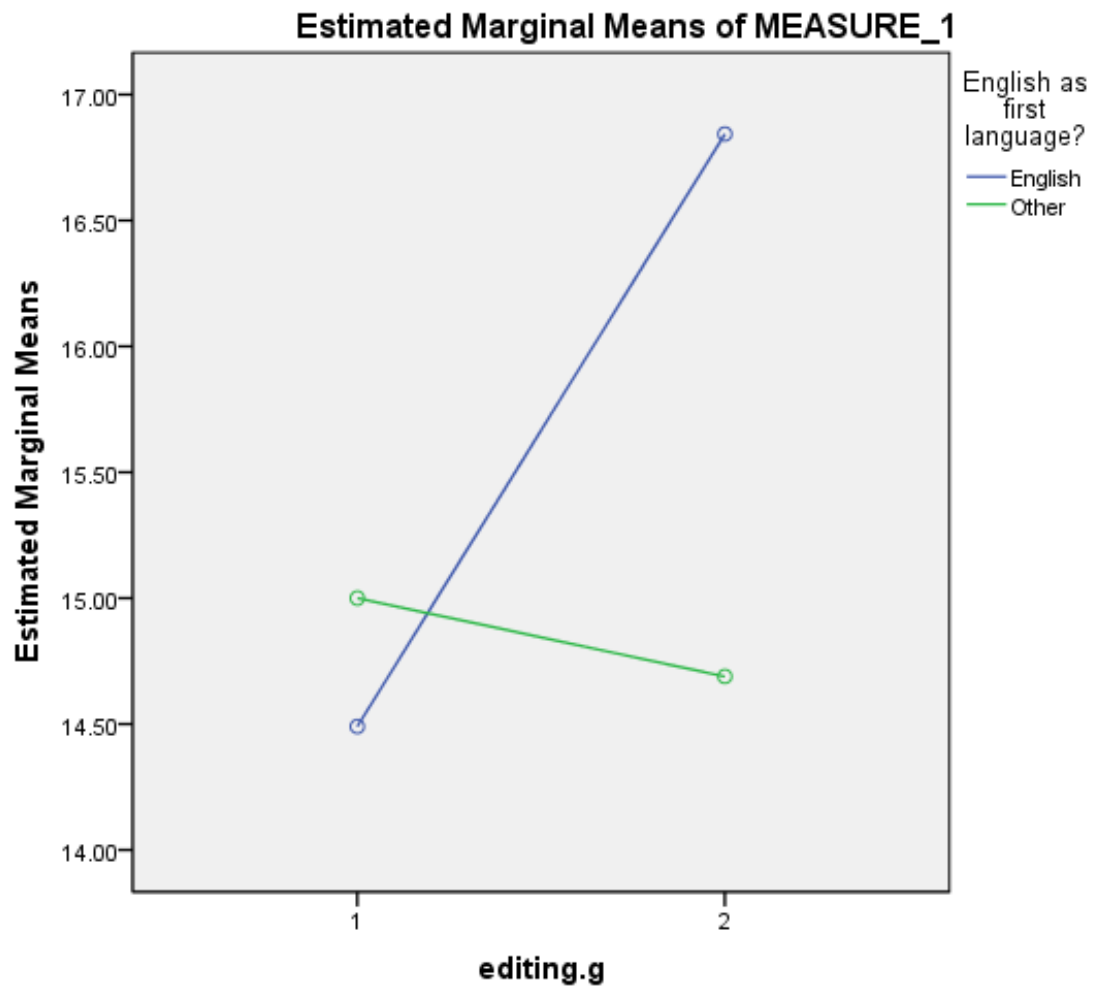
- Effects of editing are very similar to the overall test
 - Professionalism, 16.105 to 17.716, $p=.007$, $\eta^2_p = .108$
 - Organization, 14.835 to 15.724, $p=.109$, $\eta^2_p = .04$
 - Grammar, 14.658 to 16.442, $p=.001$, $\eta^2_p = .155$
- Grammar and professionalism are a little stronger; organization's influence is a little weaker
- No significant interaction, and no significant main effect of gender
- Overall, women like articles in both conditions a little better than men do, but that difference is nonsignificant

Ethnicity

- Similar main effects, but organization is a bit stronger
 - Professionalism, 15.990 to 17.414, $p = .019$, $\eta^2_p = .085$
 - Organization, 14.528 to 15.578, $p = .06$, $\eta^2_p = .054$
 - Grammar, 14.417 to 16.150, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .141$
- No significant interactions, though a larger sample might have found some
- No significant main effect of ethnicity
 - Differences for white and black respondents ($p = .098$) and white and 'other' respondents ($p = .086$) approach significance. White respondents are a little more critical than others of what they see as 'grammar'

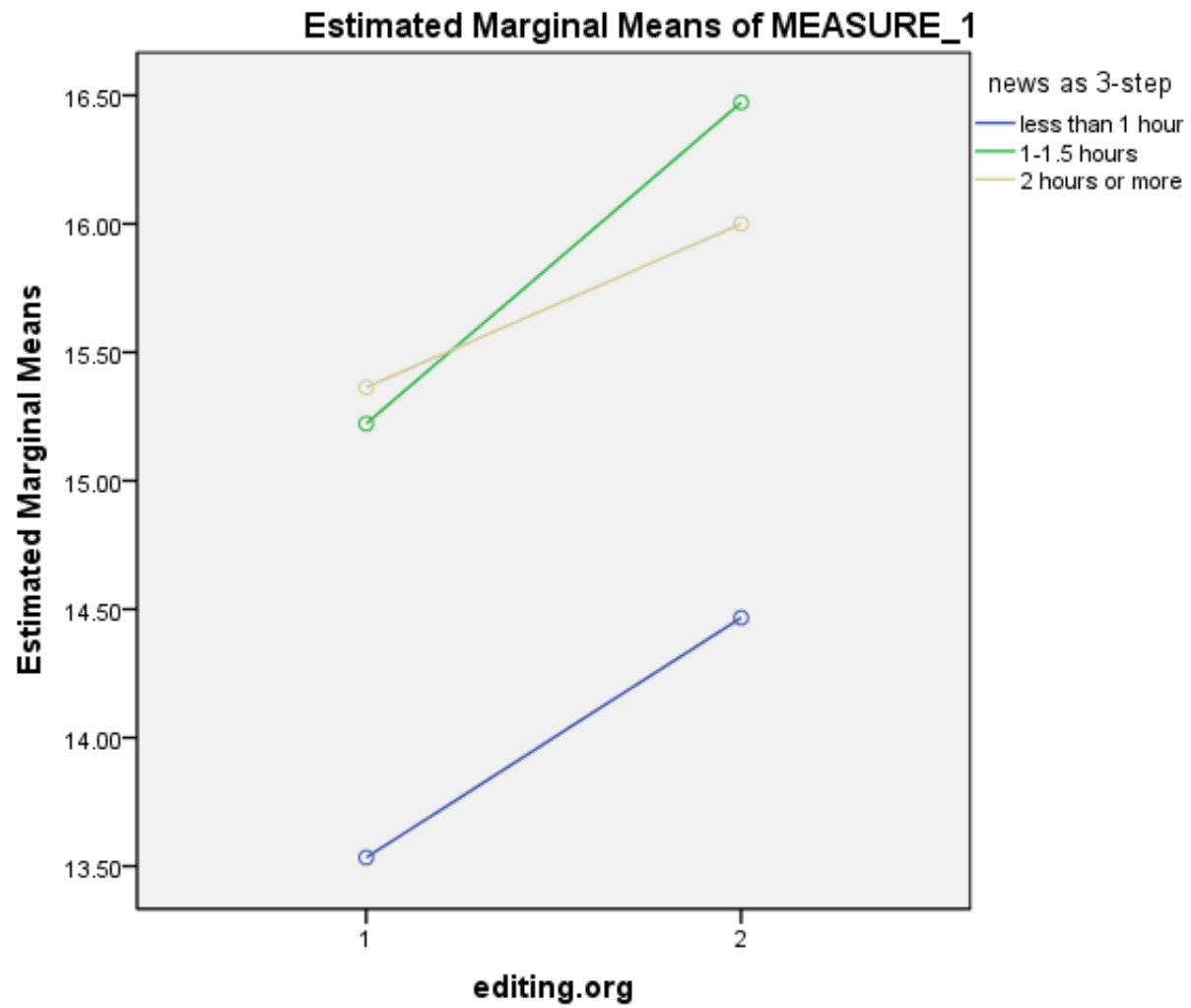
Language you speak at home

- Professionalism is the only significant main effect
 - Professionalism, 15.897 to 17.272, $p = .048$, $\eta^2_p = .06$
 - Organization, $p = .186$; grammar, $p = .090$
- There's a significant interaction of language and grammar
 - People who speak a language other than English at home see edited articles as slightly worse in grammar and unedited articles as much better
- No significant main effect of editing or language on grammar or organization, and no other interactions



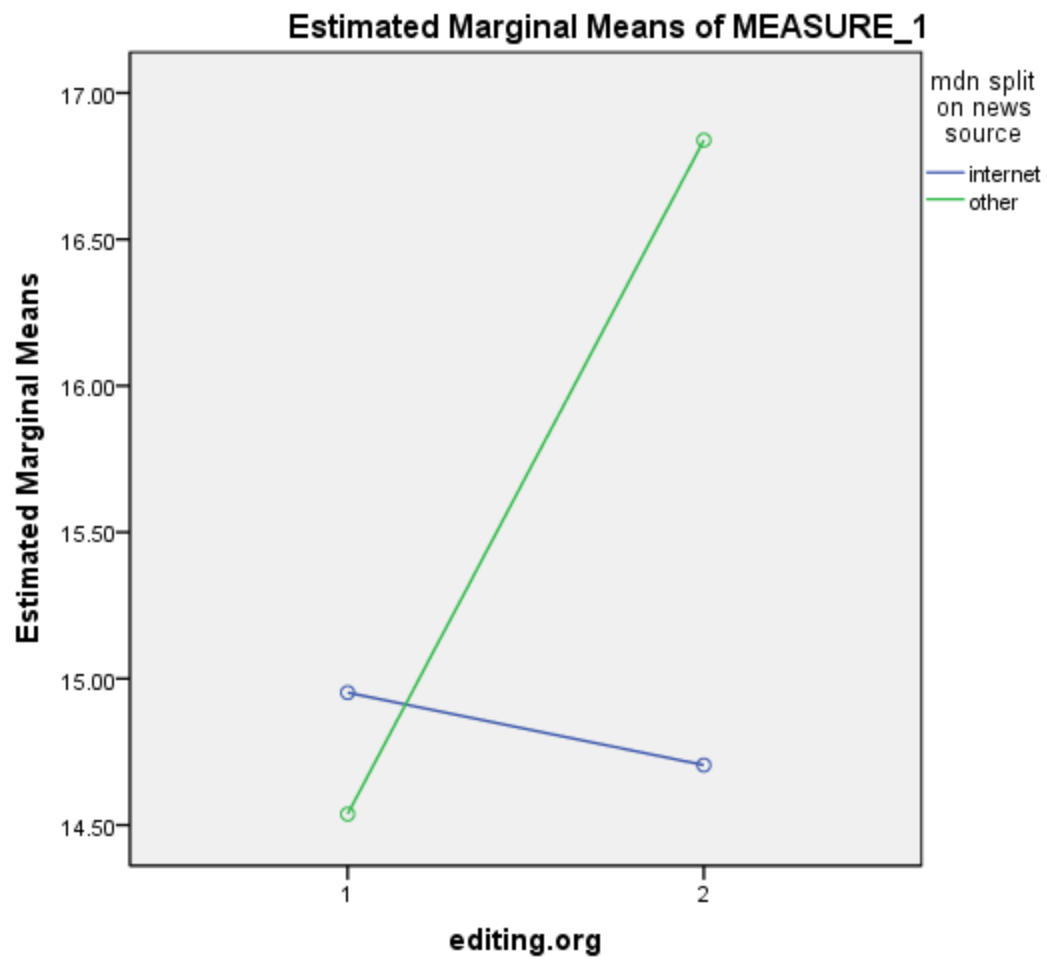
News consumption

- Familiar main effects
 - Professionalism, 16.057 to 17.614, $p = .009$, $\eta^2_p = .104$
 - Organization, 14.706 to 15.646, $p = .091$, $\eta^2_p = .045$
 - Grammar, 14.584 to 16.336, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = .152$
- The interaction of editing and news use on grammar approaches significance ($p=.123$). People who read more news find more to complain about
- But: Big main effects of news consumption
 - People who get two hours or more of news a day think an article's grammar is worse than people who get <1 hour
 - People who get more than an hour a day of news are more likely to think an article is badly organized than <1 hour



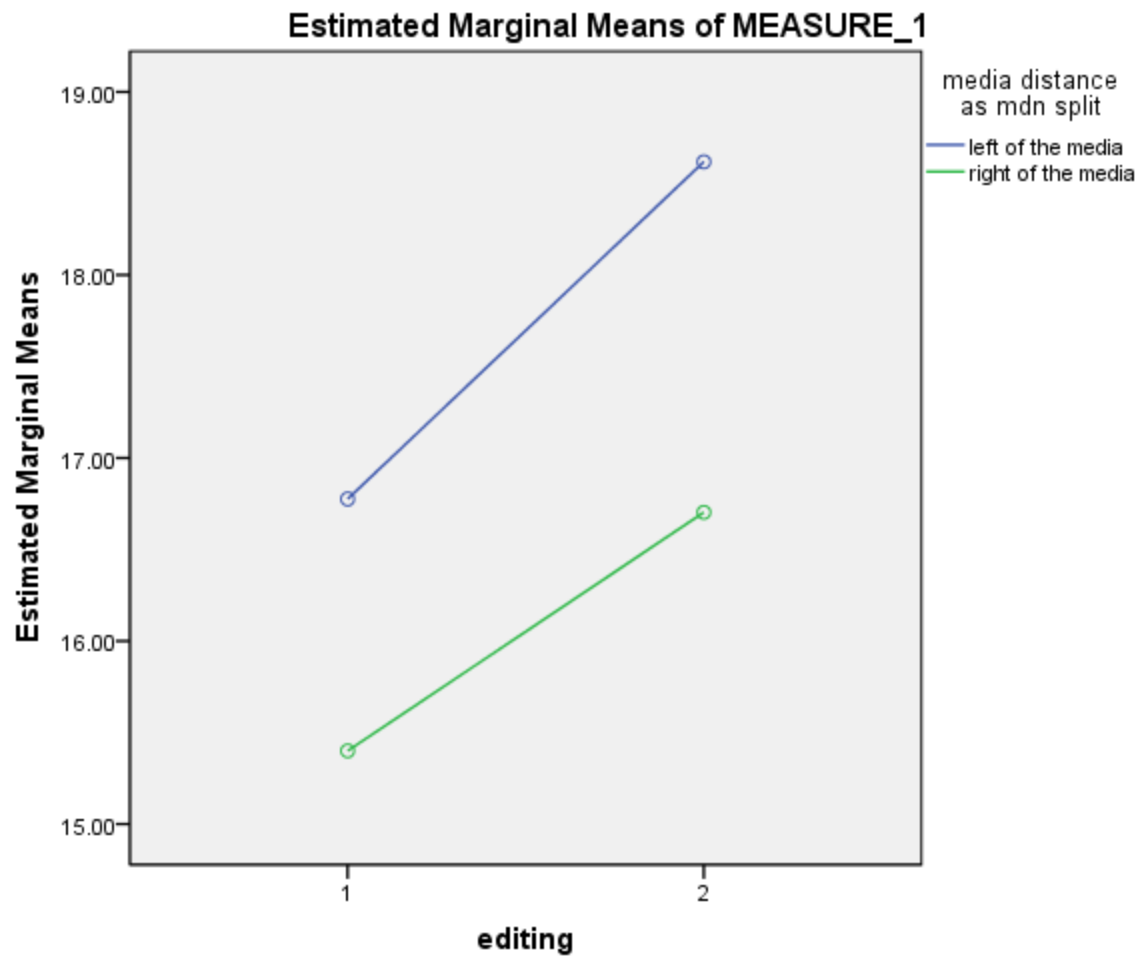
Where do you get your news?

- Media use by itself (how much TV, how much Internet) doesn't effect perceptions of quality
- The source of news, on the other hand, makes some differences
- If 'the Internet' (not newspaper Web sites) is your main source of news, you're slightly more likely to see an edited article as badly organized and much more likely to see an unedited article as well organized.
 - The interaction ($p = .017$, $\eta^2_p = .086$) and the main effect of editing ($p = .053$, $\eta^2_p = .057$) are both significant
- Effects of editing on professionalism and grammar are familiar



Liberal commie media plot

- People rate their own politics and the politics of the media to produce 'media distance': Do they see the media as generally to the left or to the right of them?
- 'Distance' has significant main effects. People who think 'the media' are a lefty plot rate articles better than people who see the media as to their right
 - That's true of professionalism ($p = .029$, $\eta^2_p = .072$) and grammar ($p = .057$, $\eta^2_p = .055$)
 - No significant effect of media distance on organization ($p = .380$) and no significant interactions
- Main effects of editing on professionalism, grammar and organization are familiar



Individual articles

Comparing the two versions of an article to each other provides some different insights

- Readers don't mean the same things we do when they say 'grammar'
 - They don't always mean the same thing from page to page
- Some stories are seen as too awful to save
- In other cases, routine editing makes a big difference
- Nobody cares much about abbreviating 'Rd.'

Points for discussion

- Editing makes a difference. It's across the board, it's not imaginary, and it's reasonably big
 - An article might need different kinds of repair to be most palatable to different audiences
 - Structural editing is important, but not more important than detail editing. 'Grammar' consistently has the biggest effect
 - 'Detail' appears to be cumulative
 - Grammar is also a catch-all for something (not sure what)
- There's not much evidence to support an obsession with *every* detail, though
 - A lot of the things we bust on style quizzes don't matter
 - Internal consistency, on the other hand, does
 - Loose ends matter too

Points for discussion

- People seem to expect news to sound better – more professional – than what they'd produce themselves
- What makes an article 'too bad to save'? Something we haven't captured here (watch this space)
- Casual readers don't appear to need the same level of processing as attentive readers. That doesn't mean there's a big audience waiting for badly edited news
- Different platforms create (or amplify) different understandings of what an article ought to look like
 - The idea that a U-desk is the most effective way to reach a multiplatform audience might want some rethinking