

# Reader perceptions of editing quality

The big ACES study (a slight return):

Yes, readers *really do* care

# O hai!

- Thanks for coming back (or for coming the first time)
- This is the new version of your ACES study on the value of editing
  - Sorry about the delays, but I really did run the whole thing over again (with ~twice as many people)
- So, in order, let's:
  - Summarize what's new since 2011
  - Review some of the old stuff
  - And look at the new data, which tell us that ...



# Editing works!

- Well, all right. Short answer: Yes. Routine editing makes a statistically significant and moderately strong difference in how audiences perceive the professionalism, writing quality, organization, and value of news articles
- Many of those effects persist across demographic categories and assorted preferences for media use
- Some of them don't, or at least they persist in different ways
  - That's an argument for more editing, rather than less

# What's different

- There's more research on closely related topics
  - Grammar seems to affect credibility at the story level (Appelman and Bolls)
  - Investment seems to affect perceptions of quality at the organizational level (a million Thorson articles)
- Technology – largely responsible for the crisis in professional journalism – might be making amends
  - The new Pew report suggests that tablets are pushing audiences back to legacy media websites
- And a bigger study, with lots more subjects, better control over the IVs, and *even more statistics!!!!*

# A bit of a recap

- We don't have to review the state of employment in the news industry, except to say it isn't getting worse as fast as it was a couple of years ago
  - In some sectors (broadcast), it's slightly better
- One big difference: Few admissions as frank as this:
  - *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.*
  - *"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)

# When content was king ...

- We all know editors add value, but we also know they don't add content – which is easier to measure
- So the original mission of the study (yes, I was wearing a 2000 ACES T-shirt and checking email on the deck when all this began) was to see if we could talk quantitatively about the contributions editing makes
  - For the record, I don't give a damn about 'email' vs 'e-mail'
- And so the adventure began – by talking to editors and looking at content
- Speaking of which ....

Drifting down the sidewalk on a crisp winter day, the smell of 'borek' eases in through the doorways and alley's not of a neighborhood in Armenia, but in an area thousands of miles away on LA's westside. In fact, depending on the day and how well you monitor your 'Twitter' and 'facebook' accounts, you can grab food from every corner of the globe on street corners and curbs.

On this day the smell of 'The Hungry Nomad' grabbed our senses and for dessert, the 'Lake Street Creamery' pulled-up alongside. This isn't your dad's taco or hot dog cart, these are high-end ventures followed by millions of facebook, twitter, etc.

... Some cities like Los Angeles are now going to rate the trucks for cleanliness like they do restaurants and everyone is scrambling to not only meet the demand, but follow the industry and grab the customer who is looking for good food, quick, easy and of course affordable.

# That's what news looks like ...

*... when written by journalists whose job isn't writing*

- Which is an issue the 'factory model' of journalism has always dealt with
  - 'Get me rewrite' wasn't just a cool line from the movies
- So the practical goal is to reproduce edited and nonedited news in a way that lets us measure the difference editing makes to the audience
- Quick time-out for social science:
  - 'Validity' deals with whether the thing we're measuring looks like it does in real life
  - 'Reliability' deals with how consistently we measure it

# Social science detour

*“Teens whose iPods are full of music with raunchy sexual lyrics start having sex sooner than those who prefer other songs, a study found.”*

- Bad news. 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 does 'raunchy' mean, and who gets to decide?
  - What does 'prefer' mean? (Erk ... what does 'having sex' mean?)
- A first step is to take concepts – like 'raunchy' or 'degrading' – and produce 'operational' definitions
  - That means we need a set of rules your Aunt Bertha could apply and successfully tell 'raunchy' from 'family-friendly'

# Significance testing and error

- 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 of confidence at which we accept that the sample probably represents the population
  - Traditionally, it's 95% ( $p \leq .05$ ), or a 5 percent chance that your result is an accident, rather than a real effect in the population
  - Is that what God ordained at Mt. Sinai? Yes, in exactly the same way as getting a driving license on your 16<sup>th</sup> birthday
- That's not the same as 'practical' or 'clinical' significance, which is what your idea means in real life

# The sausage-making part

- ‘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
  - ‘Writing’ is a crapshoot, but it correlates well (.874)

# 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

- Is it bad to study human behavior using undergrads? That's actually two questions:
- Are students a good stand-in for political, military or social elites?
  - No, but they're really good 'real people'
  - We're not an average 'midwestern university'
- Can you generalize from *any* nonrepresentative sample to a population?
  - On one-way questions ('if the election were held today, would you vote for Crook or Liar?'), no
  - With multivariate effects (do people who watch a lot of X react differently to Y?), you can be pretty close

# Stories and scales

- We started with 8 ‘web-first’ stories
  - Each story was edited, producing edited and unedited versions of each
  - Each participant saw 4 edited and 4 unedited articles (which ones depended on when you walked in the door)
  - In this design, you are your own control group: You see material in both conditions, and if you don’t like something for idiosyncratic reasons, you have 3 others to smooth it out
- After each article, participants answered a set of questions on 7-point Likert-type scales
  - Markers of good editing that editors had suggested
  - New questions added after ACES 2011 to address the question of ‘would you pay for this’?

# Scales

- Professionalism ( $\alpha = .840$ )
  - This story sounds like it was written professionally
  - This is the kind of story I expect from a serious news site
  - I like the way this story is written
  - I would return to a website that provided stories like this
- Writing ( $\alpha = .874$ )
  - This story doesn't always use the right words
  - This story uses poor grammar
  - This story looks like it was written in a hurry
  - There are a lot of mistakes in this story
- Value ( $\alpha = .642$ )
  - Stories like this are worth paying for
  - This is the kind of story you could get for free anywhere

# Some details of what's measured

- 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 more complex 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

- 121 participants (2 dropped for extreme responses)
- 61% women, 39% men
- Average age, 23.97; median age, 21; SD 8.125
- Mostly white (42%) and black (37%)
  - Most other participants (11%) were South Asian
- English is the most common home language (77%)
  - 19 other languages among ‘language spoken at home’
- About 66% spend less than 1.5 hours a day getting the news
- Most (53%) spend 2.5 hours or more/day on the Web
- Most (57%) get their news from ‘the Internet’

# Overall responses

*These tests measure overall responses to all edited stories. Sums of responses are subtracted from 28 to create a positive scale; results in all four cases are significant at  $p < .001$*

- Edited articles are seen as:
- More professional            12.774 to 10.167
- Better organized                    14.489 to 12.408
- Better written                    14.151 to 11.571
- Of higher value                    8.819 to 7.500

# Story averages

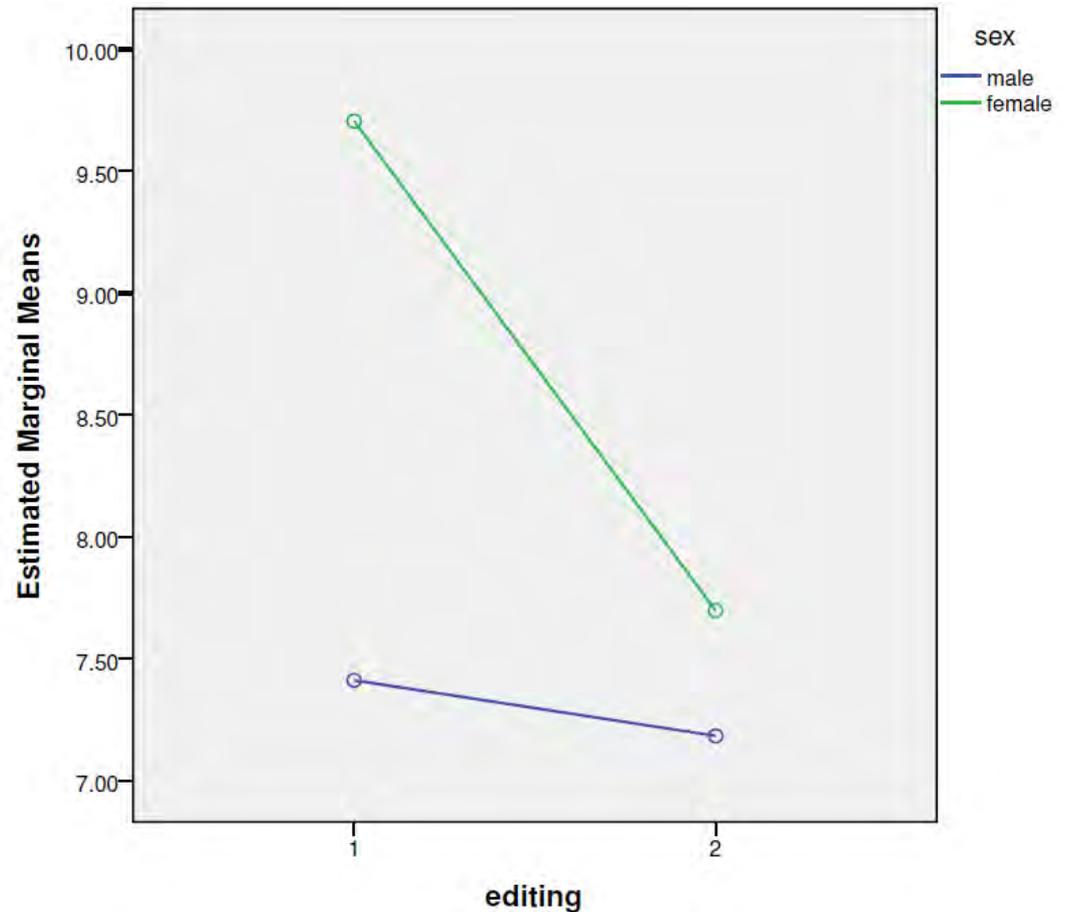
- On six of the eight articles, editing made a statistically significant improvement in perception of at least one outcome variable
  - When journalism and communication majors were taken out, all stories were improved on at least one variable
  - Some of the improvements seen in the whole sample are no longer significant, though
- The ‘value’ variable is the hardest to move, particularly for non-communication majors
- Proximity is a logical suggestion, but it isn’t entirely consistent

# Factors driving value

- Positive changes in perception of value seem to be most often associated with perceptions of professionalism and organization
  - Improving perceptions of how well a story is written doesn't seem to move the value needle by itself
- A preliminary regression test suggests that the significant predictors of changes in value perception are professionalism and gender
  - Specifically, being a woman is a predictor of whether you see an improvement in an article's value from editing

# Value: Gender x editing

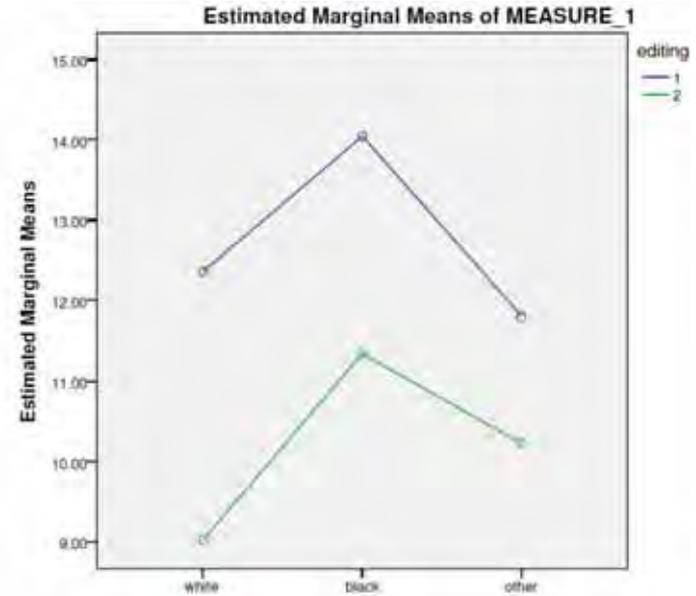
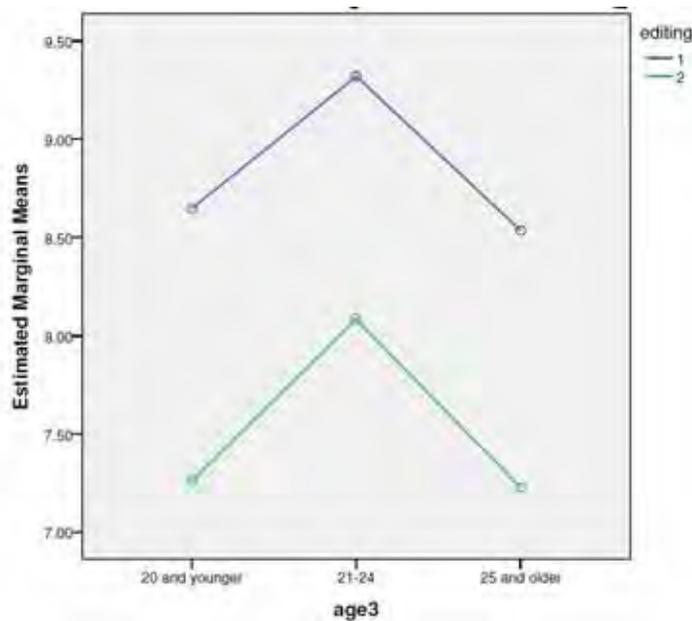
- Here's a good way to start talking about demographics and interactions. Editing makes a huge difference in how women see the *value* of an article. Men, on the other hand ...



# Editing and demographics

*A quick rundown (not too many stats) on how editing interacts with various audience characteristics*

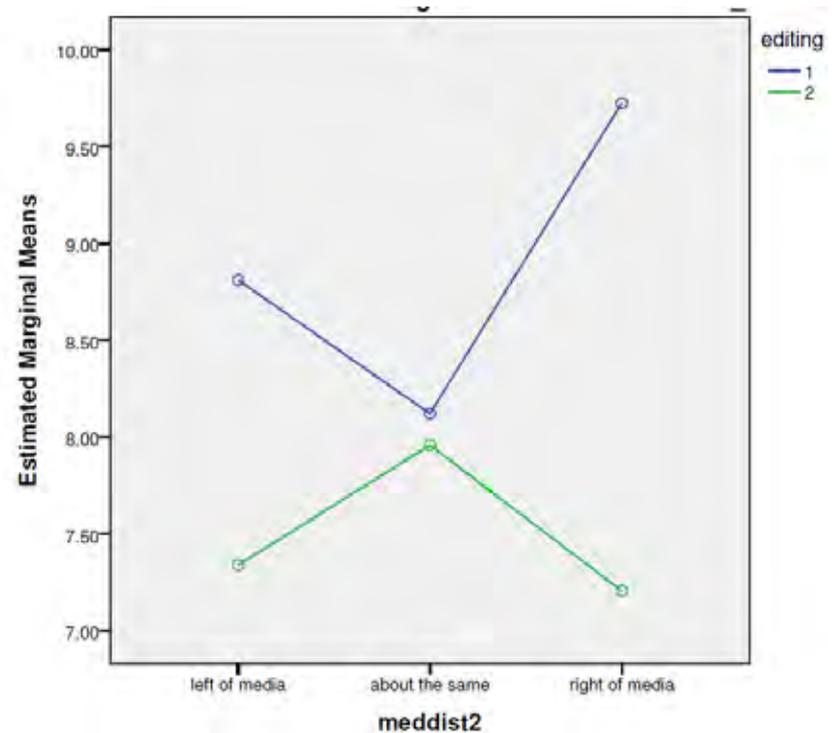
- The main effect of editing is pretty consistent: strongly significant, moderately large effect
- Age and gender don't have much effect on perceptions of professionalism, organization or writing quality
- There's a fairly consistent effect associated with ethnicity; black participants seemed more lenient
- Second-language (or two-language) speakers don't see as much dropoff between conditions as 1Ls



- The age chart at left shows a nonsignificant effect of age on value (check the vertical scale)
- At right is a significant main effect of ethnicity on professionalism – but the takeaway is that editing makes a difference for everybody

# Take that, liberal media! Or not ...

- ‘Media distance’ asks you to rate your own politics and the media’s politics, then subtracts to see if you’re left or right of (or about the same as) “the media.” The only place where editing doesn’t produce a significant increase in value is the middle of the road

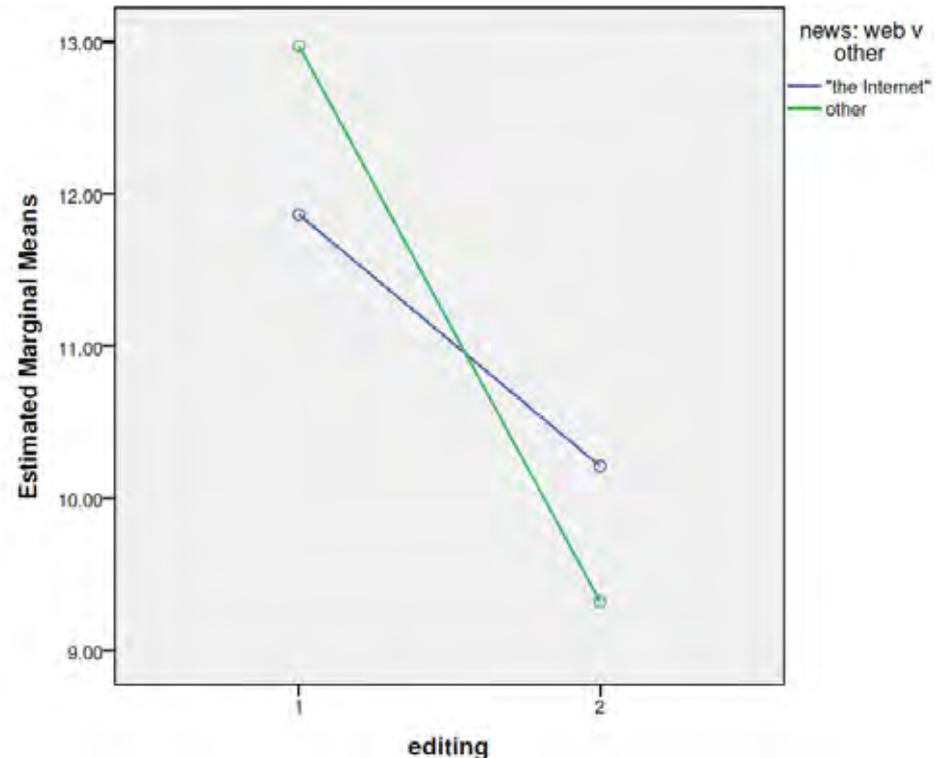


# Editing and media use

- Main effects of editing remain significant and moderately strong
- No effects on perceptions of professionalism or organization in the whole sample based on news use, internet use or main source of news
- TV use makes a difference: heavier and lighter TV users tend to rate edited articles about equally, but heavier TV users are significantly more lenient toward nonedited stories than are lighter users
- This wasn't what we found last year, but ...

# Who's your audience?

- The interaction of editing and news source is non-significant in the whole sample, but when we take out the jour/comm/PR majors, look what happens to professionalism



# Life without J-majors

- And that appears to be where some of last year's interesting interaction effects were hiding: Subtract the communication-type majors (n = 38), and some things happen differently
- Effects of ethnicity and language appear pretty similar so far
  - The bulk of 'other' speakers are also in the South Asian/other ethnic category
- There's a bigger effect of news use, such that heavy users are less tolerant of unedited stories

# Conclusions and limitations

- Like any study, this one had to balance validity and reliability. Keeping stories realistic meant tradeoffs in how tightly the manipulation is controlled
  - Some reviewers won't like that
- Still, it seems appropriate to conclude that editing has a real and noticeable effect on journalism above the sentence level and below the frontpage level
- Not everything we do affects everyone, but just about anything we do affects someone
- We might want to think about specializing in audience needs as well as in platforms

# Next steps

- Further exploration of what it means for a story to be edited – a kind of meso-editing that captures what we do in the area between fixing sentences on an editing test and assembling the frontpage
- Looking at the effects of editing on processing/recall
- Looking at the effects of display type and illustrations on editing perceptions
- Looking at how the new routines of interactive journalism affect editing practice
  - And being sure that editing can affect routines as well