

QUALITY OF READING: MEASURES ASSESSED BY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Hilary Cade - RSL Media

Synopsis

The paper describes RSL's experiences in assessing quality of reading measures by returning to the 'grass roots' level of qualitative research. The paper concentrates on the preliminary work for the UK NRS involving a first stage of group discussions, which investigated a wide range of quality of reading concepts, and a second stage of semi-structured interviews in which concepts emerging from the group discussions were tested in question form for their answerability. The findings of these interviews provide important indicators for the future.

RSL's experiences in related projects also discussed, namely qualitative follow-up work conducted for the new question "Useful in your work" introduced on the 1990 Businessman Survey, and 'VIVA', the proprietary project for the International Herald Tribune which investigated the Visibility, Impact and Value of Advertising in different English Language international publications.

Background

Since the last symposium, advertising agencies and many publishers have continued to call for more "quality of reading" data to supplement and add value to the basic reach and frequency data, and thus to aid media planning decisions. "Quality of reading" data can be defined in its broadest sense as data which measures the different dimensions of reading behaviour (such as frequency of reading, time spent reading etc) and attitudes to reading, which make it possible to discriminate between publications. A subject for debate is which dimensions in particular indicate "quality of reading": for example, is where the publication was obtained useful as an indication of the quality of the read, or is it simply data on an additional dimension of the reading event? The issue of obtaining quantitative data of a qualitative nature presents three key problems:

- How to develop questions which indicate "quality of reading"
- How to ensure these questions can be meaningfully answered
- How to ensure these questions are appropriate to different publication types and successfully discriminate between them.

In order to explore possible quality of reading measures which might be introduced on to the Great Britain NRS, NRS Limited set up a dedicated Quality of Reading Working Party of which RSL was a part. Our experiences to date in the first stages of this exploratory process for the NRS, together with related experiences from other projects, will be discussed in this paper.

The qualitative approach

In a large scale continuous survey such as the NRS it is all too easy to get "bogged down" in the numbers and to lose sight of what those numbers actually represent: the readers! Of course, the output of the NRS has to be quantitative, but in the process of developing and refining questions for future use, we have found it enlightening and educative to step away from the numbers and return to the grass roots level of the readers by means of qualitative research. This has also enabled us to check on the workings of the recency and frequency questions currently in use on the NRS. Qualitative research has enabled us to listen to readers' expression of their reading behaviour and attitudes towards different publications, to note the terminology they use when talking about their reading, to observe their reactions to certain concepts or to questions posed in a certain way, and finally to assess whether their responses to questions are meaningful. Talking and listening to readers through qualitative research should form an integral part of any research programme to investigate quality of reading measures; to omit this vital stage is a false economy, as will become clear in the findings detailed in this paper.

The complexities of reading

The first stage of qualitative research conducted in 1992 for the NRS comprised four group discussions, two with men and two with women. A spread of ages and social grades was ensured in an attempt to include as many reading 'groups' as possible. Picture boards were used in the course of the groups to stimulate discussion on reading environments and moods in order to build the picture of reading.

Reading emerged as being complex: a complex interrelationship between the reader and the publication in a given reading environment, which in turn may contribute to a certain mood of reading.

Different reader types were identified: there was the predominantly 'newspaper reader' as opposed to the 'magazine reader'; the 'information reader' whose aim is to read for what information he or she can glean from it; the 'relaxation reader' who wants to switch off from the day's events; the 'active reader' whose mind is alert and absorbing the reading matter, in contrast to the 'mechanical reader' who tends to be going through the motions either out of habit, or perhaps out of obligation; and so the list goes on.

There were different attitudes to reading: some set aside time to read, while others snatched time in their busy daily routine; some were reading to fill in time, and others were reading spontaneously, on impulse. Numerous reasons for reading emerged: it could be escapism or boredom; as a treat or for entertainment and enjoyment; or for information and education; and so forth. The reading environment had an important impact on the reading event, whether it was the home, at work, in a public place or on a means of transport. This complex formula of reader + publication in a given environment produced in the reader a mood which could range from relaxed to focused, from absorbed to sociable.

The complexity of the reading event which emerged from the research provided useful guidelines for future research: that questions must take account of different types of respondent reading different types of publication in different situations. The findings relating to attitudes and mood provided direct input into question design for the next stages of research.

Reading similarly emerged as a complex event from other qualitative research studies conducted by RSL. An example of this was work conducted for the 1990 British Businessman Survey (BMRC) when a new question worded "*How useful overall is... (publication) in your work*" was introduced. The qualitative follow-up research which was conducted by RSL, this time by means of telephone depth interviews with BMRC respondents, to assess whether the question was answerable and whether respondents' claims discriminated successfully, again highlighted the complexity of reading and the consequent complexity surrounding the question process regarding reading.

"Useful" was found to have different shades of meaning which varied from respondent to respondent. For example, does it contain critical, 'need to know' information, or is it simply 'interesting'? Respondents identified different tiers of usefulness: specific information, background information and peripheral information. The question itself could have a different frame of reference depending on whether the respondent was thinking of the whole spectrum of information sources or whether he or she was thinking of sources relating to a specific sector such as computer magazines. Claims for specific business titles were reasonably comparable, but claims for these titles were not always comparable with those for the more general business titles such as *The Economist*. As a result of these findings, the BMRC data for this question was published but only for specific business titles. The question has been included on the new Businessman's survey, due to be published in May 1993.

The complexity of the reader relationship with a publication may require a complex research approach as demonstrated in the qualitative research study VIVA (Visibility Impact and Value of Advertising) conducted by RSL in 1992 on behalf of the International Herald Tribune. The objective of the research was to measure the visibility of advertising, in particular colour advertising, in the International Herald Tribune and other international publications, to explore the relative image and positioning of different publications, and to assess each publication as a context for advertising.

The depth interview guideline, which was followed in four continental European countries, incorporated a wide variety of angles in order to achieve the objective: a general discussion on information requirements led into the specifics of their reading behaviour and patterns; types of reading behaviour such as "leaf through all pages" were recorded through the respondent demonstrating the way in which he or she read a given publication; a measure of advertisement visibility was obtained by means of prompting with actual advertisements in a copy of the publication he or she had seen; a brand mapping exercise was used to position a publication in relation to other publications on different dimensions such as "upmarket" or "good international coverage"; and finally an exercise was conducted whereby the respondent sorted advertisements according to the publications he or she considered to be the appropriate vehicle or vehicles.

The chart (appended) presents the results of the brand mapping exercise where the different publications are positioned in relation to the mean rating for all publications on a given dimension. The International Herald Tribune emerged as relatively strong on 'international coverage' and 'enjoyable reading'. The Financial Times and The Economist's strengths were their 'reliability', 'high quality' and the fact that they are 'read by influential people'. While Time and Newsweek were found to be strong on 'enjoyable reading' and 'leisurely read', they performed relatively less well on 'authoritativeness' and 'reliability'.

A long way from the NRS?

All this qualitative exploration seems a long way from the NRS which requires tight, simple questions which are not open to misinterpretation. The second stage of qualitative research for the NRS brought the exploratory process one step closer to its conclusion. Stage 1 had highlighted certain concept areas which would be worth testing in further research. These were then formulated into questions by the Quality of Reading Working Party and researched in 50 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted between November 1992 and January 1993. These interviews comprised...

- A shortened NRS interview - to stimulate the NRS interview context
- Quality of reading questions
- In-depth discussion on quality of reading concepts
- Discussion of question responses

In half the interviews the quality of reading questions, as formulated for testing by the Working Party, were asked before the discussion, in the other half they were asked after the discussion, to ascertain whether "warming up" respondents in informal discussion might have an impact on their responses to the different questions.

The question areas being tested were those which from the Stage 1 group discussions had emerged as concepts which communicated reader relationship with a publication, and/or concepts which were observed as being answerable:

- Frequency of reading (asked in the same form as on the British NRS, immediately after the recency question)
- Source of copy
- Place of reading
- Proportion of copy read
- Time spent reading
- Way in which read publication
- "Favourite" publication
- Reaction if publication were no longer available
- Mood

With the exceptions of 'Frequency of reading' and 'Mood' each of the questions was asked of approximately half of the sample and for 8 selected publications. At the end of the interview the executive interviewer made a judgement as to whether or not a respondent's claims were deemed to be confirmed or not confirmed by comparing claims with the respondent's own description his or her behaviour and attitudes.

The bar chart (appended) shows the results of this confirmation exercise which, while not definitive owing to the small sample size involved in the study, provides a strong indication as to the relative performance of the different questions. A summary of the results for each question follows.

Frequency of reading

Q. Looking at the scale on the card, which best describes how often you read or look at...?

ALMOST ALWAYS	QUITE OFTEN	ONLY OCCASIONALLY	NOT IN THE PAST YEAR
At least 3 issues out of 4	At least 1 issue out of 4	Less than 1 issue out of 4	

From the Stage 1 group discussions, 'frequency of reading' emerged as a strong indicator of reader relationship with a publication. However as the chart shows, based on 426 frequency claims in the Stage 2 interviews, a substantial proportion of claims (11%) were not actually confirmed in the light of in-depth discussion with the respondent on their reading patterns. There was little difference in the levels of confirmation between men and women or between average issue readers and non average issue readers although claims tended to be slightly more robust amongst average issue readers as might be expected. From observation it was clear that respondents divided into those who used the verbal scale in formulating their response and those who used the numeric scale. This would not necessarily pose a problem if the two scales were felt to correspond. However this was not always the case: when some respondents switched from using the verbal scale to the numeric scale (which is lower down on the card and somewhat less conspicuous than the verbal scale) it was observed that in some cases claims were changed. For example, the verbal 'only occasionally' was felt to suggest less frequent reading than "less than 1 issue out of 4". There was also felt to be too large a gap between 'only occasionally' and 'not in the past year'.

The verbal scale was on the whole found to be more respondent friendly. However it lacks the precision of the numeric scale as perceptions of reading frequency vary by respondent and by frequency of publication.

The 'frequency of reading' question was generally observed as being difficult to answer: it forces the respondent to average their reading behaviour when the frequency with which people read a given publication could vary dramatically depending on circumstances, available time and the contents of a given issue.

Respondents did not naturally relate the verbal response scale to a publication's frequency. Thus there was an observed tendency for respondents to think that they read a daily more frequently than a weekly or a monthly and vice versa, with consequent overclaiming or underclaiming.

Problems also occurred with regular but infrequent readers. A person who reads a daily paper every Saturday but only on Saturday, would tend to perceive his/her reading frequency as 'almost always', as for him/her it is a weekly read. Overclaiming would then tend to occur.

Lapsed readers found the 'frequency of reading' question difficult as they were unsure as to whether to respond on the basis of current reading patterns ie. 'only occasionally' or on the basis of their reading patterns from a previous time which might be 'almost always'. This occurrence was noted for 'house and home' magazines read on a regular basis at the time of, for example, moving house/redecorating and then not read at all. The same problem would occur for event-related magazines such as wedding and pregnancy magazines.

Very occasional non-recent readers found the question a strange one to be posed. The rarity of the reading occasion was not felt to correspond with 'only occasionally'. This group of readers in particular would argue for their being an extension of the scale at the bottom end, including a point in between 'only occasionally' and 'not in the past year'.

Two further points were observed which resulted in claims not being confirmed: if the copy of the publication was not the respondent's own copy, there was noticed to be a tendency in some cases to underclaim the frequency with which they read because they did not perceive it as being a publication that they personally read, although they might regularly pick up, for example, their husband's copy. On the other hand overclaiming frequency of reading was observed among readers of women's weekly magazines: if one of, say, three magazines was read each week, reading frequency tended to be perceived as being higher than reality for all of the three magazines.

Regarding the level of confirmation of claims by type of claim, some variation was observed as shown following.

Confirmed

	Yes	No
Almost always	95%	5%
Quite often	80%	20%
Only occasionally	92%	8%

While the 'almost always' and 'only occasionally' claims at the extremes of the scale were relatively robust, it was the 'quite often' claims which were most susceptible to non-confirmation. A contributory factor to this lower level of confirmation of claims for 'quite often' is likely to be the different interpretation of the verbal scale by different respondents and for different frequency of publications as already discussed.

These results and observations raise questions and concerns about the 'frequency of reading' question, not all of which could be answered in this piece of qualitative research. The numeric scale is clearly necessary to bring precision to the response but must be felt to correspond with the verbal scale.

Source of copy

Q. How do you usually obtain the copy of... you read or look at?

1. I buy it at newsagent/newsstand
2. I buy it at a shop/supermarket
3. Another household member buys it at newsagent/newsstand
4. Another household member buys it at a shop/supermarket
5. Home-delivered from newsagent
6. Paid subscription, delivered by post to my home
7. Free copy, delivered by post to my home
8. Free copy, hand delivered to my home
9. Office/work copy
10. Friend's/relative's copy
11. Seen at doctor's waiting room, hairdresser, library or other such places
12. None of these

From the Stage 1 group discussions, 'source of copy' was found to be understood and readily assessed by respondents. While it was not judged to be necessarily an indicator of a particular relationship with a publication, many publishers find it a useful tool. As expected in Stage 2 a relatively high proportion, 95%, of claims for the 'source of copy' question were confirmed.

There was a slightly higher level of confirmation for claims by men than by women, this trend being repeated in the confirmation results for other questions.

As regards the position of asking this question, whether it was before the discussion or after the discussion, respondents were more likely to have their claims confirmed if they had previously discussed their reading patterns and behaviour in informal discussion. The relative differences between the 'before' and 'after' claims for different questions were noted because the greater the difference, the more influential the discussion is in leading to confirmed claims, and the less adaptable the question will be to a quantitative question approach such as the NRS where the respondent cannot be previously 'warmed up'.

Overall therefore a high proportion of claims to the source of copy question were confirmed. This tallied with the results of interviewer observation: respondents were generally able to answer the question without any hesitation.

Place of reading

Q. Where do you usually read the copies of... you see?

1. At home
2. While travelling (including commuting)
3. At work
4. At a friend's or relative's home
5. In a doctor's waiting room, hairdresser's or other public place
6. Elsewhere

Like 'source of copy', 'place of reading' was found in Stage 1 to be a readily understood concept but again not necessarily an indicator of a particular relationship with a publication.

In the Stage 2 interviews, as anticipated, a high proportion (95%) of claims for the 'place of reading' question were confirmed. While a similar pattern of men having slightly higher levels of confirmation than women, AIR claims being more robust, and more claims being confirmed when preceded by the in-depth discussion was observed, there was a high level of confirmation across the board.

Respondents were observed as being able to answer this question easily and without any visible hesitation: where they usually read a publication is factual and therefore easily identifiable on the part of the respondent.

Proportion of copy read

Q. How much of a copy of... do you usually read or look at?

1. I read or look at every page
2. I read or look at most pages
3. I read or look at about half the pages
4. I read or look at about a quarter of all pages
5. I read or look at a few pages

From the Stage 1 group discussions, respondents were found to have difficulty with numeric questions relating to reading. 'Proportion of copy read' fell into this category but was included because the amount of pages read was found in many cases to correlate with reader relationship with the publication.

Unlike the 'source of copy' and 'place of reading' questions which had a relatively high (95%) level of confirmation, 'proportion of copy read' showed a lower level (88%) of claims being confirmed in Stage 2.

Respondents were observed to find difficulty in responding to this question: there was a tendency to resist being forced to average their reading behaviour as reading was felt to vary so much on circumstances and on the content of a given issue of a publication.

Generally speaking, the question was difficult to answer because it demanded brain power on the part of the respondent who was forced to attempt a completely non-habitual calculation.

Furthermore it was noted that respondents tended to answer for proportion of copy 'read' rather than proportion 'read or looked at' and this was certainly a contributory factor to the relatively high level of non-confirmation. It is clearly important to include a strong prompt to including 'looking'.

Less recently read publications showed lower levels of confirmation, respondents tending to be less familiar with those publications with which they have less of an established routine (recency in many cases correlating with frequency), or simply because they could not remember how much they had read of a given publication.

The 'proportion of copy' question thus presented difficulties for the respondent to answer and hence a substantial proportion of claims remained unconfirmed.

Time Spent Reading

Q. Approximately how much time do you usually spend in total reading or looking at an issue of... by the time you have finished with it?

FOR NEWSPAPERS WITH A MAGAZINE EXPLAIN: "I MEAN THE NEWSPAPER SECTION ONLY, NOT THE MAGAZINE"

1. 5 minutes or less
2. 15 minutes
3. Half an hour
4. Three quarters of an hour
5. 1 hour
6. An hour and a half
7. 2 hours
8. Two and a half hours
9. 3 hours or more

The group discussions highlighted the difficulty of asking a numeric question relating to time spent reading but raised the importance of a question to communicate 'spending time over reading'. The question tested in the Stage 2 interviews was nevertheless a numeric one.

In Stage 2, a substantial proportion of claims (18%) for the 'time spent reading' question were not confirmed in the light of discussion.

This question was generally found to be a difficult one for respondents to answer and hesitation was observed. The broad reason for their hesitation was that they were not accustomed to calculating how much time they spent on a given publication. Respondents required 'heavy' prompting to take into account all reading events for a given issue. Indeed, failure to take into account different reading events was one contributory factor to the relatively low level of confirmation of claims.

As a result of all these difficulties some respondents were observed to be resisting precision by converting the times into broader ranges. The fact that confirmed claims even when they were preceded by the discussion were still at a relatively low level underlines the fact that non-confirmation was not an isolated occurrence.

Way In Which Read Publication

Q. Which of these phrases describes the way you usually read...?

1. I read it thoroughly from cover to cover
2. I spend time with the items that interest me
3. I flick through it
4. Other

'Way in which read publication' was a question designed to communicate how people read a publication rather than the precise proportion of copy they read or the precise time they spend on it.

However a substantial proportion of claims for this question in Stage 2 were not confirmed. In general, a small amount of difficulty in answering the question was observed. As for 'proportion of copy read' and 'time spent reading', respondents resisted averaging their behaviour as they claimed that the way they read a publication depended on circumstances and on the content of a given issue.

Some 'confused' claims, which will in turn have contributed to the proportion of non-confirmed claims, occurred because of the overlap between the items which were not felt to be mutually exclusive. Indeed it was felt that all three response options could apply for a single publication.

From observation of respondents' reactions to this question, it is thought that once reworded to overcome the 'confusion' between the responses, it might prove an answerable question: respondents did not express any conceptual difficulty in thinking about the way in which they read different publications.

"Favourite" Publication

Q. Would you say that... is one of your favourite publications? Yes No

The group discussions highlighted the concept of a 'favourite publication', which might be reading for a 'treat', especially among women.

In Stage 2 this question recorded a high level of confirmation of claims. However the chart does not tell the whole story in relation to this question. Without being conceptually difficult, the question did present some difficulty for the respondent because of the polar scale which left the respondent with one of two extreme choices. As a result claims were forced into an unnatural division which while not strictly incorrect did not present the full picture including the "grey area" in between the two extremes.

The question is also problematic because of the different responses for men and women. While women were happy to claim a publication as their 'favourite' even if only as a self-justification for buying it on a regular basis, men found the word 'favourite' too emotional a word and resisted the affinity claim. For them 'favourite' was only felt appropriate for publications which related to a consuming interest, such as yachting or cars, and certainly would not apply to, for example, a daily newspaper.

While the question did not stand up to the research test for the reasons described, the concept behind the question of an affinity towards a publication is not an alien one to respondents and could be effectively communicated in a different question as described under "reaction if publication were no longer available".

Reaction if publication were no longer available

Q. How sorry would you be if, for whatever reason ... were no longer available?
Very sorry Quite sorry Not very sorry

Like 'favourite publication', group discussion respondents in Stage 1 were observed as responding to the idea of a publication no longer being available, whether it was a positive or a negative response.

In the Stage 2 interviews there was a relatively high level of confirmation of claims for this question. The level of confirmation was consistently good across the different analysis groups: there was little difference between frequency groups and recency categories; and the question was not susceptible to varied levels of confirmation depending on whether or not it was preceded by the in-depth discussion.

The question was observed to be easy to answer and discriminated well between publications. Where the "favourite" publication question fell down because of the polar scale the three point scale of this question successfully combined simplicity with respondent choice. Just as some respondents, particularly men found the word 'favourite' too emotional a word, so some respondents felt the word 'sorry' was too emotional, their feelings not being so strong for a newspaper or magazine. The word 'disappointed' was put forward as a possible alternative expression. However this is felt to be a minor problem for a question which was easily answered with a relatively high level of claims confirmed.

Mood

Q. Which of these statements usually apply when you read...?

1. I look forward to reading it
2. It helps me relax/to unwind
3. I read it for information
4. I read it for ideas/advice/help
5. I read it for entertainment
6. I read it when I have time to myself
7. I read it when I have nothing better to do
8. I read it out of habit
9. I feel it is specially for me
10. I read it for work
11. I like to be seen with it
12. I read it for a special treat
0. None of these

The 'mood' question as tested did not produce meaningful results owing to the length and diversity of the response list. This does not, however, imply that the concepts included in the 'mood' question could not be formulated into effective questions.

CONCLUSIONS

Key trends can be identified from this research which should be noted for future research on this area. (It should be noted that the trends are not mutually exclusive: more than one trend could apply to a single question):

- Behavioural questions where the response does not tend to vary are easily answered with a high level of claims confirmed eg. source of copy, place of reading.
- Behavioural questions where the response varies depending on the respondent's circumstances and on the content of a given issue of the publication are difficult for the respondent to answer and a substantial proportion of claims are not confirmed eg. frequency of reading, time spent reading, proportion of copy read, way in which read publication.
- Behavioural questions where the response demands a calculation on the part of the respondent are difficult to answer and a substantial proportion of claims are not confirmed. Frequency of reading, time spent reading and proportion of copy read are most susceptible to this problem.
- Attitudinal questions which are simple but still allow the respondent to choose may be easily answered and discriminate successfully between publications eg. reaction if publication were no longer available.

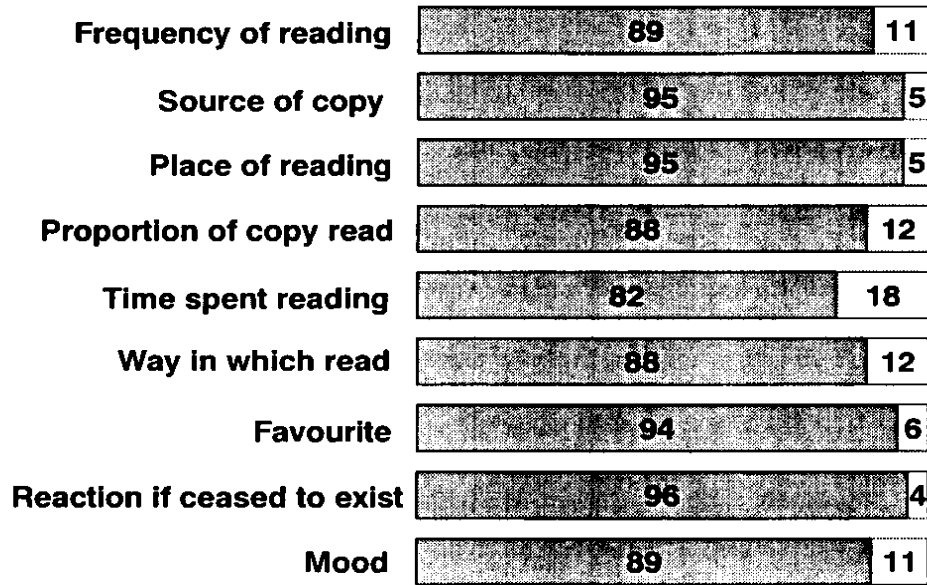
The research discussed in this paper was, of course, only the first step in a programme of testing of quality of reading measures envisaged by the NRS. At the time of writing this paper, the NRS had not decided on the precise nature or scope of the next steps in the programme of development work. RSL would foresee a phase of quantitative testing together with further industry consultation about the relevance of the quality of reading measures.

The Future

The process of exploring and testing quality of reading measures is a difficult and complex one. However the difficulties must be outweighed by the future usefulness of the data to publishers and media planners: Young and Rubicam discuss in their paper the issue of quality of reading questions and data from the user's point of view. Celia Jones from MJP Carat International describes in her paper the use and benefit they have gained from their study 'International Media in Perspective' (IMP), also conducted by RSL, which incorporated reactions to "qualitative" statements about different international publications.

Clearly the need is there for quality of reading questions to supplement basic reach and frequency data. At RSL we will continue to be involved in the research to develop quality of reading questions which can be measured quantitatively but which would stand up in a qualitative forum: in other words, questions which are asked and can be answered in readers' terminology.

Proportion of claims confirmed/not confirmed (%)



Confirmed Not confirmed

1270/HC

FEB'93



MEAN RATINGS OF PUBLICATIONS

KEY

- IHT = International Herald Tribune
- FT = Financial Times
- E = The Economist
- NW = Newsweek
- T = Time
- BW = BusinessWeek
- = Mean Rating for each dimension

BASE: All respondents

