Contextualising Metrics: A Case Paper on Angèle Christin's
*Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of*
*Algorithms*

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***Metrics at Work:*** **Questioning the Concept of Organisational Monoculture**

"Industrial monoculture," this is how Steven Vallas (Kaplinsky in Vallas, 2012, p. 200) characterises the effects of globalisation giving a voice to the so-called "McDonaldization" thesis of globalisation. Cultural differences, so the thesis goes, are eradicated in lieu of conformity. As internationalised financial flows sharpen competitive pressures, firms are pushed to the efficient frontier – it is conform or perish (DiMaggio, 2001, p. 10). Scholars espousing the theory of 'technological determinism' argue that technological innovations shape society, including the structures and practices of organizations (Hatch, 2018, p. 166). According to this perspective, the ubiquity of digital metrics should lead to a homogenization of organizational practices, as companies adapt to the demands of this new technology. However, Christin's (2020) ethnographic study challenges this deterministic view, demonstrating that the same set of web analytics can be interpreted and used differently depending on the cultural and institutional context of each organization. Christin's micro-level enquiry in the form of an ethnography offers a nuanced perspective on the technological determinism thesis by investigating how different newsrooms use the same set of web analytics.

Taking outset as a cultural analysis situated in the symbolic-interpretivist tradition and drawing on Christin's (2020) case study, this essay will argue that the culture surrounding the respective organisations shapes the meaning of web analytics, which in themselves are symbolically indeterminate resources, and that accordingly shapes the newsrooms' organisational structures Adopting a neo-institutionalist perspective, this essay will apply Ann Swidler's 'tool kit' theory of culture as an alternative to the classical Parsonian view of shared values. Under this definition, culture is viewed as a set of symbolic resources that organizations use to shape their strategies of action, with these strategies reflecting the broader institutional fields within which they operate (Beunza, 2019, p. 3). Consequently, digital metrics are interpreted and utilized differently in each newsroom, reflecting their unique cultural dynamics. The essay shall depart from a summary of the case, followed by a

comparative analysis of the two newsrooms. Finally, based on the analysis and the problems identified therein, solutions shall be presented for a hypothetical other newsroom.

*Metrics at Work* by Angèle Christin (2020)[1] is an ethnographic study following two different newsrooms, one in New York (The Notebook) and the other in Paris (LaPlace). Both newsrooms were established by journalists from legacy institutions, spurred by the promise of the internet partially alleviating constraints that plagued the newsrooms of yesteryear – no longer did they have to worry about limited space nor strict print deadlines (p. 9). But with this new wave of quantification, that omnipresent tension that has loomed over newsrooms between financial pressures and the pursuit of quality journalism has taken a different form. What she finds, however, is that the interpretation of digital metrics is not monolithic: they "always come with a symbolic potential." (p. 4). Though the two newsrooms use the exact same analytics programmes, in the New York newsroom metrics are wholly financialised, "counted, targeted and priced" whereas in Paris they are interpreted as "complex signals" - two varying interpretations, the former "technical" and the latter "emotional." (p. xii). It is a comparative and transnational case study of what happens, and more importantly, what does not happen, "whenever metrics take over." (p. 14)

**Feeding the Machine?**

The Notebook frames these digital metrics as squarely indicative of financial pressures, "counted, targeted and priced", but at the same time journalists aspire to writing articles they think worthy of that mythical title journalists have been divined in American history as the "fourth estate" (p. 7). This dichotomy reflects the neo-institutionalist concept of organizations striving for "institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness" (DiMaggio & Powell in Hatch, 2018, p.89-90). Neo-institutionalists emphasise the influence of deep-rooted social structures and cultural norms on organisational behaviours. Shaped by a cultural legacy, in this institutional field, they are both

[1] Due to frequent citations to Christin, a citation like (Christin, 2020, p. xyz) shall be abbreviated as (p. xyz) henceforth

subtlety pressured and strive to achieve the high ideals of American journalism—ideals of an American Mythos of journalism (e.g. as explored by Arendt, 1972) held up by figures and events like Walter Cronkite, the Pentagon Papers, and Watergate. Painting the dichotomy journalists at the Notebook enact succinctly, one former editor states, "[a blog post] gets tons, tons of attention and comments and you don't even think it's that good!" (p. 110). They are, as one journalist puts it, "feed[ing] the machine"; they are reluctantly securing digital metrics by writing so-called "fast" juxtaposed to "slow" articles and thus satisfying the economic imperatives they face as an organisation (p. 111). By writing these quizzes, these short blog posts that do not require much work or thought, they can draw a lot more engagement. On the other hand, they serve a different form of journalistic value by writing 'slow' articles. One editor describes these as an 'investment', exactly meeting the demands for social legitimacy that neo-institutionalists predict coexist with financial demands.

While LaPlace uses the same Web Analytics, the different engagement with metrics opens up for an alternate structure. Counter to the McDonaldization thesis, concepts and notions are "grafted onto locally salient concepts" (Chong, 2018, p. 171). Borrowing from literary theory, the significance of a sign – digital metrics in this case – is meaningless outside the web of signs it is placed in: literal, 1-1 translation between languages, and by analogue cultures, is impossible. As the literary critic Walter Benjamin's (1969, p. 74) seminal essay illustrates, translating *Brot* to *pain* carries with it different connotations, though the intended object is the same, thus the source for the "symbolic potential" that Christin perceives in the digital metrics. Compared to the picture painted of the US above, in France journalism has been far more insulated from the market's pressures through state subsidies and the public is conceptualized in a nearly Rousseau-esque manner as representing a civic collective ascribed with a form of "unitary opinion" (p. 12). By extension, journalists have far more ambivalent attitudes towards metrics instead and the organizational structure is more organic allowing them greater freedom (p. 122). The structure of the organization is not only influenced by the technology

utilized, as the technological determinist argument suggests, but it is also significantly constituted by the respective national cultures in which each organization is embedded.

**Metric-Driven Organizational Blueprints**

Building on this conceptualisation of digital metrics and the perception of the tension it entails, The Notebook mitigates this tension through "boundary-work", where they intentionally construct symbolic boundaries to symbolically compartmentalize the two incommensurate values (Gieryn in Christin, p. 108). Three symbolic boundaries become apparent in the Notebook: employment statuses, the physical structure of the office itself and the structure of the homepage. The Notebook's structure is deeply reminiscent of a professional bureaucracy that rely on standardised skills just like similar ethnographies of American newsrooms of the 70s had concluded (p. 102; Hatch, 2012, p. 105). Role and functional delegation are strict, but within those roles individuals are afforded a high degree of flexibility, and the division of labour is largely made according to that fast/slow dichotomy of article production. The hierarchy is evident, with the chain of authority clearly defined. Privileges accrue to those higher up, including options for more flexible working hours and even months off for the sake of more contemplative long pieces through a so-called "Fellowship program" (p. 106). Editors and managers, not required to constantly churn out content have their own private offices. In contrast, journalists responsible for producing daily "fast" articles sit in a central, open-plan area, grouped in tables by their writing specialities. "My role is to put something out there immediately," as one "fast" writer told Christin (p. 105). Their role is to churn out content rapidly, while editors perceive article writing as an inefficient use of their time as the bureaucratic structure demarcates and specialises certain skill sets. This division is further reflected in the structure of The Notebook's homepage. Prestigious "slow" articles get the prideful place at the top while the abundance of "fast" articles are relegated further down the website (p. 107). The structure of the organization tacitly communicates and compartmentalises these divisions, delineating the fast articles from the slower, and the places of production of economic from journalistic value.

The rigid, almost mechanical structure at The Notebook differs drastically from the organic structure of LaPlace because of their alternative mode of engagement with metrics. The symbolic boundaries present at The Notebook are almost entirely absent at LaPlace. There is little division of labour, the editor-in-chief and founder has written the most articles, wholly opposite to the "waste of time" it appeared to the editors at The Notebook (p. 115). There is no clear role delegation, and the journalists frequently switch between writing different kinds of articles (p. 114). So too are the physical boundaries gone, the whole place is but one huge open office with no cubicle dividers. Nor are they separated in tables by functional role nor is the website configured in any specific way. As Beunza (2019) points out building his concept of the "performative trace" on it, how the physical space is configured partly informs the end-product – at LaPlace they are physically conditioned to work across tasks. Many employees in their interview with Christin even noted the "start-up" spirit of the organization and recall having started in the founder, André's kitchen - to the point of fault, however, as the lack of coordination, it too has been inherited from the kitchen (p. 118). The flexibility, non-formal stratification, and organic structure is compatible with the culturally inherited notions of these journalists as intellectuals possessing that same flexibility as reinforced by the French national journalistic field.

The "genius of bureaucracy" at The Notebook lies in the control it allows the editors to wield. Having tasked themselves with the job of balancing between the two values, they have opted for a structure that is irrevocably tied to the tight form of control it allows (DiMaggio, 2001, p. 14). Bureaucracy, embedded in this rational-legal form of legitimacy, provides a manner of efficiently allocating positions and posts based on formal norms rather than on the basis of charisma or social ties. The dissipation of a formal hierarchy does not necessarily equate to the dissipation of the power structures in LaPlace. Power, as Foucault famously noted, is ubiquitous. The assertion should not be taken too literally, but instead be used as a prompt to ponder where else it is reproduced when one power structure is eliminated.

As the bureaucratic structure in LaPlace dissolves, other forms of power like social hierarchies seep in, as Neely (2022) found in her study of hedge funds where power became allocated on the basis of connections and a flat hierarchy became a guise for unchecked power flowing to the founder. Power, no longer constricted by the iron cage of bureaucracy as observed in The Notebook, is now distributed via other avenues. The privileges reserved for the top of the authority chain in The Notebook — closed offices, the freedom to write from home, the leeway to write in-depth pieces — have largely evaporated in LaPlace. In their stead, esteem and recognition emerge as the new currencies of power. This shift can be seen in how employees interact. For instance, an employee implores André to write a piece because of his editorial skills. "You have to write this," the employee tells André, "it's going to be so good!" (p. 115). Likewise, the closed-door headline negotiations characteristic of The Notebook are replaced by open discussions in LaPlace, evidencing a potential shift from formal to social influence.

In this less rigid structure, ambiguous social dynamics supersede explicit metrics. These dynamics bring forth alternative power manifestations — nebulous, less transparent, yet no less influential. As Foucault's work, including Madness and Civilization (1988) and Discipline and Punish (1979), suggests, this ambiguity can give rise to "disciplinary power" (Hatch, 2018, p. 317). This power, wielded by cultural norms, shapes conceptions of normalcy and subtly steers behaviours. Such hidden power structures, though less overt than formal ones, may be equally pernicious, subtly introducing inequalities. Rather than metrics directly asserting control over how they work and what they write as in The Notebook, the prospect of poor metrics at LaPlace inexorably looms over them as "feelings of shame and dejection" are turned inwards (p. 122) – the kind of interiorization Foucault's work centres on as power is indirectly exerted on the inner life of individuals' themselves, their conscience itself becomes a means of control (Hatch, 2018, p. 318). Achieving high traffic numbers turns into an "emotional quest to seduce their algorithmic publics" (p. 122). Ambiguity leads to the

interiorization of power in journalists at LaPlace, whereas the technical disposition towards metrics and formal roles characterising a Weberian bureaucracy as at The Notebook prevents this.

This disciplinary power is largely absent from The Notebook as a result of the "buffering strategies" open to them, which allows employees to insulate the ramifications of metrics on themselves. Their recognition as journalists is not compromised rather they can compartmentalize and rationalise poor analytics as only an indication that their work is unpopular, but not necessarily poor journalism when the economic and journalistic values are cast as incommensurable. Those symbolic boundaries drawn as part of that boundary-work function as "buffering strategies" (p. 121). That compartmentalization method is thus uniquely accessible to employees at the Notebook and impossible for those at LaPlace, because of their organisational structure lacking those same symbolic boundaries.

**Reframing Perspectives: A Deeper Scrutiny of Power Dynamics**

Upon considering another perspective to choose to study this same case, this author would adopt a "postmodern perspective", with the perspectives understood as Hatch (2018) as to be but loose groupings of similar theories and concepts and the choice of perspective thus mostly having heuristic value. Underpinning this choice is a rejection of a Kuhnian (2018) incommunicability among different paradigms, leaning instead towards Feyerabend's (1992, p. 26; MacIntyre, 1977) "epistemological anarchism." Rather than viewing the classical traditions of organization theory (modernism, symbolic-interpretivism, postmodernism, as in Hatch 2018)) as isolated, they are seen as offering complementary conceptual tools that can yield a richer understanding.

The postmodern perspective allows us to problematize the power structures that were only briefly touched upon by Christin and with the postmodernists' fragmentation of culture it allows for a deconstruction of implicit assumptions in her account. Christin's own account aligns with the symbolic-interpretivist tradition, employing comparative case studies and emphasizing symbols and understanding. Unlike Ho (2018), Christin's study doesn't explicitly frame its ethnography in terms

of deconstructing an abstract metanarrative like the "market". Moreover, the comparative case study, with its limited sample size of two (as emphasised by King et al., 1994), fails to provide the generalizations that modernism seeks through positivist inquiry. Through a postmodern perspective, one could explore the under-examined elements of Christin's account. Christin merely glances over assertions that may contradict her assumption unified culture. One employee interviewed, for example, notes that he does not perceive the fast/slow distinction with the same pejorative connotations as Christin attempts to suggest is common at The Notebook – he but identifies the "fast" term as pointing to different "rhythms" and pace of publishing (p. 106). Similarly, an implicit assumption underpinning Christin's account – and this whole analysis, in fact - is the intelligibility of "national journalistic fields". Postmodernism would allow us to question both of these assertions made: both of a unified organisational culture as well as the neo-institutionalist notion of a "national journalistic field." And where the symbolic-interpretivists is largely limited to the usage of concepts as Foucault's disciplinary power in order to explain the case, with a postmodern perspective the shift in normative perspective and concepts allows for better mode of enquiry on what ramifications it for inequalities and a deeper exploration of power structures. Christin, for example, mentions that when a mess would occur, "the managing editors – usually women – would try to fix this messy situation […]" (p. 119) Only a very slight allusion is made: the inequalities are literally hyphenated.

**A Reflexive Engagement With Metrics**

The use of digital metrics is the cause of much anguish in both organisations, with different national journalistic fields having tacitly shaped the perception of metrics. Consequently, bringing clarity and transparency to how metrics are used in each organization will help in resolving the issues the ensuing ambiguity has caused.

In The Notebook, the consumerist interpretation of digital metrics and a deeply ingrained hierarchy have created a two-tiered system, effectively dividing the organization and causing a disconnect in the company culture as covered above leading to doubt whether the term "fast" article is pejorative

or not. Some journalists are relegated to "feed[ing] the machine" writing fast articles while others are privileged with the time and space to craft thoughtful long-form articles. The immediacy imperative, summed up by an employee's lament that "It never ends" (p. 119). This division, a form of "sophisticated Taylorism" as Vallas (2018) puts it, perpetuates internal inequalities and fosters a culture of constant precarity for the former group. On the other hand, LaPlace's ambiguous treatment of digital metrics leads to problems of internalization of control practices as discussed previously, and as Correll (2017, p. 731) points out, ambiguity, especially in terms of demands, disproportionately affects already marginalized groups.

Addressing these issues requires a "reflexive engagement" with metrics as proposed by Beunza (2019, p. 9) who proposed it as a solution to similar problems with financial metrics. Be they digital or financial metrics, clearly aligning expectations with them and contextualizing their use firm-wide could improve the organizational structure and culture. This approach would clarify the role of metrics, define their extent as a goal, and enhance communication across the organization. The goal is avoiding the divisions that rely on unspoken assumptions as The Notebook exemplifies. This clarification would mitigate the issue of ambiguous demands, lessen internal inequalities, and refocus the organization's goals. And to the worry that this only benefits employees, a healthier workforce seems to promote a more financially sound organization. As the workplace-transformation conducted in Kelly (2020, p. 77) showed, lessening these internal disparities and the state of precarity, they contribute to lead to lower levels of burnout inducing lower turnover rates, and significantly lower hiring costs. As for retaining the social legitimacy this essay has argued constitutes a significant part of the organization's goal, lower turnover reduces the risk of dilution of the company's identity and promotes a culture of equity and fairness, aspects highly valued in contemporary social and professional norms as Kossek et al. (2014) note.

**Divorcing the Structure of Authority from the rest of Bureaucratic Model**

The structure of authority as illustrated by the problems at LaPlace is an area that requires attention, indicating a clear need for more formalized roles to prevent issues like conflicting instructions and general disorganization. This issue in LaPlace is symptomatic of a common problem among growing organizations: maintaining a start-up structure even when the organization has expanded beyond its capacity, leading to a "control crisis" as journalists report frequently receiving contradicting orders – no one knows who wields control (Hatch, 2018, p. 130; p. 118). However, formalization should not compromise the organic structure and open communication that characterizes the newsroom. Turco (2016) presents a case in 'The Conversational Firm' that illustrates the feasibility of maintaining open communication channels while establishing a clear authority structure. This, however, Turco emphasises, requires a concerted effort from management to ensure that vertical differentiation does not compromise the existing, open communication lines between different levels in a startup organisation, as at The Notebook with the fast/slow dichotomy hindering it entirely.

Moreover, changes must be implemented gradually to avoid disrupting the company's identity, as sudden changes could substitute the organization's identity. As Gonzales-Black (2015. 16:55), former organizational design lead for Zappos, emphasises there is a need for long-term support, training seminars, and persistent messaging when implementing alternative organizational structures. Therefore, while the case of LaPlace highlights the need for a clear authority structure, organizations must also be wary of the 'iron cage' of bureaucracy that seems to ensnare The Notebook, and any changes made must be implemented gradually and persistently.

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