CASE PAPER EXAM: METRICS AT WORK

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When people started accessing news online, a whole new reality for news organizations appeared. In order to survive, newsrooms had to generate more online traffic. Suddenly, the evaluation of journalism began to rely on clicks measured and analyzed by metrics, instead of the previous editorial evaluation, where journalistic excellence was measured by the quality of one's article. The book "Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms," written by Angéle Christen, explores the use and impact of metrics in newsrooms. In Christin's book, she conducts fieldwork on two newsrooms: the American newsroom, TheNotebook, and the French newsroom, LaPlace. Based on these, she provides us with insights into how the two organizations have chosen to structure their organization and use metrics in very different ways.

In this paper, I will first compare the organization of work at TheNotebook and LaPlace. Secondly, I will analyze each newsroom's form of organizational power and the role metrics have in each case. Thirdly, I will try to apply postmodernism, a different theoretical perspective than the author, to the study and analyze the case. Lastly, based on my analysis of the organizational problems, I will provide recommendations on how another newsroom can avoid the same problems. The analytical work on the two newsrooms reveals that the reason they differ in their approach to metrics is due to their different organizational structures and power, and that in order to balance between editorial and click-based evaluation, they need to incorporate elements from both organizations to flourish.

COMPARISON OF THE TWO NEWSROOMS

A workplace's division of labor tells us how much tasks and responsibilities in an organization are distributed (Hatch, 2013, p. 92). The labor can be divided horizontally in terms of functions and departments, but also vertically in the number of levels in hierarchy. TheNotebook's division of labor is characterized by departmentalization, where they are divided into their functions as fast and slow writers. They only concentrate on either providing the website with short blog posts or with longer, in-depth articles (Christen, 2020, p. 104). Additionally, the strong vertical hierarchy, which I will return to, also shows a division of labor between staff and editors, where each group has no role in the other's job. This shows a high level of specialization, where their work is narrowly defined and are employed to only carry out the tasks in their particular field (Hatch, 2013, p. 95). Furthermore, we can observe the degree of division of labor in the organizational layout of the office space, where the cubicles are divided into their respective functions as slow or fast writers, with editors having separate offices (Christin, 2020, p. 109).

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Compared to TheNotebook, LaPlace's staff has less distinct roles and performs more flexible and fluid tasks. Their total workforce, including the top editors, contributes both to the click-based aspects and the longer, investigative articles, indicating a lower level of specialization (Christin, 2020, p. 115). The absence of separation is also mirrored in the open office space, where editors, interns, and staff writers are mixed (Christin, 2020, p. 116). This weak division of labor and low specialization is further reflected in the process of brainstorming headlines, which takes place in this open office area at LaPlace, where everyone is invited to chime in and express their opinions. In contrast, TheNotebook's editors brainstorm in their private offices, once again emphasizing a higher level of specialization.

The layout of the two offices not only highlights the differences between the roles of the organizations, but also provides insight into their hierarchy and structure. At TheNotebook, the more prestigious offices are assigned to those higher up in the hierarchy, whereas LaPlace's open office space reflects their flat hierarchy, making editors more accessible to the staff. Hierarchy is a way of understanding how authority is distributed in an organization (Hatch, 2013, p. 92). TheNotebook is an example of a tall hierarchical structure, with centralized authority at the editors (Christin, 2020, p. 106). They also report to and hold meetings with corporate executives, creating an extra layer of hierarchy. LaPlace has a flat organizational structure, where decision-making is not solely centralized around the editors, but more spread across staff, as evidenced by their brainstorming process.

This open office space also created an informal and relaxed culture at LaPlace. Culture in an organization can be described as shared understandings and expectations, that influence the way an organization does things in a specific way (Hatch, 2013, p. 159). At LaPlace, this informal culture contributed to what Christin described as a noisier newsroom with more chatting and informal interactions among staff but also between staff and editors, unlike TheNotebook, where there was minimal interaction among staff members (Christin, 2020, p. 116). The staff's informal interactions and the company's flat hierarchical structure laid the foundation for a low level of formalization and standardization as: "The editorial formats, organization of the offices (…) all relied on informal processes and priorities that changed depending on the time, person, and topic under consideration" (Christin, 2020, p. 118). This led to frustration among the staff as they received different directions from editors leading to unproductivity and missed deadlines.

The internal hierarchy among the staff at TheNotebook reinforced the distinction between fast and slow writers, contributing to the culture of the American newsroom. If you examine the discourse used by the staff and editors at TheNotebook, they use terms like "trashy topics" and "nuggets," and as one editor stated in an interview, "the blog posts are just less" (Christin, 2020, p. 110). It's evident that they are critical and do not consider fast writing to have high editorial value. This hierarchy is further emphasized by the editors' prioritization of their homepage, where long, slow-written articles are featured prominently. Even though the writers at LaPlace frequently expressed that bloggers were not professional journalists, they still saw quality in them as they were "academics, activists, experts, or politicians who wanted to share their opinion or knowledge of a topic" (Christin, 2020, p. 113). LaPlace's homepage reflects this flat hierarchy, as the editors do not prioritize any format above another. The layout differentiates, and the main spot can feature any format, be it slow or fast (Christin, 2020, p.118).

ORGANIZATIONAL POWER AND THE USE OF METRICS

The analysis of the four parameters of division of labor, structure, hierarchy, and culture provides us with tools to delve deeper into the organizational power of the two newsrooms and how the type of power contributed to their use of metrics. Organizational power refers to the ability of individuals or groups within an organization to influence others and affect decision-making (Hatch, 2013, p. 251). Digital metrics are described by Christin as "quantitative outputs provided by algorithmic software programs for the benefits of online users" and can be used in various ways depending on the context of the organization they are used in (Christin, 2020, p. 3).

Christen distinguishes between two modes of evaluating journalistic excellence: the editorial mode of evaluation and the click-based mode of evaluation. The former is measured on the quality of one's article, while the latter depends primarily on the article's online popularity. Although both newsrooms began with the intention of transforming journalism by creating innovative, in-depth articles with high editorial quality, over time they realized, as the use of metrics arose, that they had to generate more traffic in order to survive. Despite these commonalities, TheNotebook and LaPlace employed metrics differently due to their two distinct organizational powers, which we will explore.

According to Christin, TheNotebook exhibits organizational power that resembles Weber's theory of bureaucratic authority (Christin, 2020, p. 120). Bureaucratic authority is a theory that emphasizes a

strong hierarchy, a fixed division of labor and high centralization, all of which I previously have characterized at TheNotebook (Hatch, 2013, p. 92). This power system contributed to how metrics were used in the production and evaluation of content at TheNotebook. The editors at TheNotebook relied on the metrics in making decisions about the editorial line of the website. However, as the staff writers were not included in the process of editorial decision-making due to TheNotebook's bureaucratic, hierarchical division of labor, they did not see metrics as an intruder in their professional work, but rather as indicators of market pressures, which influenced economic sustainability and success, which was not of their concern (Christin, 2020, p. 121).

LaPlace's flatter hierarchy, weak specialization and weak division of labor kept click-based and editorial goals constantly intertwined, showing similarities to Foucault's theory of disciplinary power (Christin, 2020, p. 120). Disciplinary power arises from the ways in which values, ideals, and beliefs are shared and become part of everyday life. It is characterized by its ability to produce self-regulating workers who internalize the norms and values of the organization that exercise disciplinary power over them (Hatch, 2013, p. 250). In an organization that utilizes disciplinary power, systematic observation and evaluation of individuals to control performance is crucial. Yet, in the absence of hierarchy and standardization, it is not the editors at LaPlace who monitor the staff, but rather the metrics. These metrics become a tool of surveillance, where a low number of clicks leads the journalists to internalize the pressure from the click-based evaluation and discipline themselves to maximize traffic, resembling how disciplinary power operates (Christin, 2020, p. 122). Thus, even if their articles have high editorial value, if the click-based value is low, journalists will only focus on these metrics, as they believe, that they serve as an indication of their worth as a journalist (Christin, 2020, p. 122).

This shows two distinct roles that metrics play in newsrooms. At LaPlace, metrics are assigned a significant role in decisions related to click-based and editorial evaluation. Despite their initial skepticism toward numbers, LaPlace still views metrics as an authoritative entity whose opinion matters and effectively "disciplines" the writers (Christin, 2020, p. 12). On the other hand, The Notebook's bureaucratic structure creates a clear symbolic boundary between click-based and editorial evaluation, leading to different valuations of metrics between editors and writers.

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APPLYING A POST-MODERN PERSPECTIVE TO THE CASES

A thing that is quite noticeable of the two newsrooms is their strong hierarchy and the lack thereof. If I were to conduct a study on this case, I would consider analyzing the two newsrooms with a post-modern perspective with elements from symbolic-interpretive approach to discover these power structurers and how metrics contribute to this.

The post-modern perspective has a critical approach when looking at organizations. The focus is on how language and discourse in an organization is used to withhold a truth of reality. The truth is interpretive to the individual, and a claim to knowing what is right and wrong is a power play (Hatch, 2013, p. 15). The symbolic-interpretive perspective on organizations is based on the idea that organizations are socially constructed, and that meanings and interpretations play a key role in shaping organizational behavior. This approach emphasizes the importance of symbols, language, and culture in shaping organizational practices and behavior (Hatch, 2013, p. 9).

Christin discusses three attitudes towards metrics: an optimistic view where metrics are objective and useful, which is typical modern approach, a pessimistic view with postmodern characteristics where they believe metrics reinforce power structures, and a symbolic-interpretive perspective where they view metrics as constructed and used differently depending on context (Christin, 2020, pp. 3-4). Christin takes the third approach, viewing metrics as symbolic resources. She uses ethnography to study two newsrooms over four years, conducting semi-structured interviews and observing the environments (Christin, 2020, p. 9). This approach is a typical symbolic perspective, where she by immersing herself in the newsrooms gains a better understanding on how metrics are constructed and used by different actors (Hatch, 2013, p. 15).

When reading the case, I found the internal hierarchy among the writers at TheNotebook noticeable. As I have previously pointed out, the discourse of the interviews reveals that both editors and writers had negative connotations about fast writing and click-based evaluation. According to the post-modern perspective, language plays a crucial role in shaping our understanding of organizations. Therefore, if we analyze how writers and editors perceive metrics, we can understand how metrics affect power within the organization.

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In the process of data collection, I would use qualitative methods, like Christin did. This would involve conducting interviews and ethnographic fieldwork as this would allow me to gain insight into the subjective experiences of the writers. To focus on the perspective of lower-level employees, I would primarily interview the writers as postmodernists believe that modernist organization theorists tend to adopt the perspective of managers (Hatch, 2013, p. 9). For analyzing the data, I would conduct a discourse analysis of the interviews, focusing on the language used regarding how metrics and click-based evaluation contribute to enhancing power structures and hierarchy within the newsrooms. Although LaPlace does not have a strong hierarchy like TheNotebook, I would follow the same procedure. This could involve examining how power and authority are distributed across the French newsroom and how writers attribute power to metrics in the content they produce.

In order to dig deeper into what contributes to this power structure, I would also make use of a symbolic-interpretative approach and look at how the organization of the newsrooms act as a symbol of the power structure. This approach is much alike Christin, however in conjunction with the postmodern perspective, the symbolic approach helps to clarify and further develop our understanding of the hierarchy in the newsrooms, as it looks at how the culture and the office organization are meaning-making symbols that shape and reproduce power relations.

The post-modern and symbolic-interpretive perspectives on organizations share some similarities in that they both view organizations as socially constructed and emphasize the importance of culture, language, and interpretation. In the combination of the two approaches, we get a more nuanced understanding of the complex power dynamics at play within the newsrooms.

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS AND HOW TO SOLVE THEM

Throughout its existence, an organization undergoes various changes, and in order to avoid stagnation, it is essential to continuously update and adjust to the occurring needs of the organization. One way to analyze this development and the crises that may arise is through Greiner's model. In this model, organizational theorist Greiner provides five stages that he believes an organization goes through: entrepreneurial, collectivity, delegation, formalization, and collaboration stages (Hatch, 2013, p. 106). Additionally, he describes the different crises and what the organization must do to overcome them. Based on Greiner's model, I will attempt to develop solutions to improve a newsroom organization to avoid the same problems that TheNotebook and LaPlace experienced.

One of the most noticeable problems at LaPlace is their lack of structure and management, as well as their flat hierarchy with weak division of labor and low specialization. This flat organizational structure leads to burnouts and frustration among the staff, because while everyone is trying to fulfill all goals - both editorial and click-based. The constant switch between the two different assignments contributes to a decline in the quality of the website, as no one has time to immerse themselves in a long article. This leaves the writers dissatisfied with the balance between editorial and click-based content on the website (Christin, 2020, p. 119).

When looking at Greiner's model, LaPlace never managed to move on from the entrepreneurial stage and finds itself in a leadership crisis. According to Greiner, as an organization grows bigger and more complex, the need for professional management is necessary (Hatch, 2013, p. 106). Although they try to employ some structure in the newsroom, the initiative is not well-accepted and the attempt to employ some hierarchy and structure fails, holding them in the entrepreneurial stage.

Although TheNotebook is very efficient, the organization ends up being too formalized and centralized. In Greiner's model they would be in the formalization stage, finding themselves in the crisis of red tape. The over-extension of bureaucracy and rules to improve efficiency, makes the organization complicated, impersonal and uncreative to the staff (Hatch, 2013, p. 107). In order to reach the next stage, the collaboration stage, they need to distribute tasks into smaller units and assign shared responsibility to groups, which is also my recommendation for other newsrooms (Hatch, 2013, p. 108).

The best practice is not pure bureaucracy nor a flat hierarchical organization, but a balance between the two. A way to avoid the problems that the two newsrooms experienced is by utilizing the best of the two organizational structures. A news organization is a creative and dynamic workplace, where innovation and immersion are important to create good journalism. My proposition is a hybrid organizational form like a flexible bureaucracy or "flatarchy" (Neely, 2023). A matrix-like structure, where people are divided into small units based on projects, allows creativity and variation between fast and slow writing, while still maintaining structure by having groups and project leaders in control of the different projects (Reitzig, 2022).

By incorporating this structure, the news organization would be better equipped to fulfill both the editorial and click-based evaluation goals. Although the transition may cause disruption within the

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organization at first, the end goal of a well-functioning newsroom with a balance between structure and creativity, while still achieving high traffic on their content, is preferable. To ensure the click-based goals are met, different project managers would be assigned to monitor performance through metrics, ensuring that the newsroom maintains a degree of formalization and standardization. By bringing in writers from different functions based on their strengths, the hierarchy is flattened, and labor is more distributed, leading to more engagement and empowerment among staff, something that TheNotebook is lacking (Hatch, 2013, p. 277). Decentralized decision-making authority is granted to these smaller project-based teams, leading to greater efficiency and innovation. This structure also allows top management to focus on organizational goals and purposes, rather than controlling the organization (Hatch, 2013, p. 108).

CONCLUSION

From this paper, it is evident that news organizations had to adapt to a new reality with the appearance of metrics. Metrics became a measuring device in determining the success of journalism. By comparing the organizational structures and power of TheNotebook and LaPlace, Christin highlights how the use of metrics differs based on their division of labor and hierarchical structures. TheNotebook is highly specialized with separate departments for fast and slow writers and a tall hierarchical structure, where editorial and click-based evaluation was divided. LaPlace's division of labor is more flexible with a flat hierarchy and less distinct roles, where metrics were more used as a tool of surveillance and discipline. By applying a post-modern perspective with elements from a symbolic-interpretive approach offers a different and broader understanding of the power dynamics in newsrooms and how metrics contribute to these structures. To avoid stagnation and overcome crises that may arise in an organization, it is important to continuously adapt to the needs of an organization in change and by utilizing a hybrid organizational structure, such as a flexible bureaucracy or "flatarchy," news organizations can balance both structure and creativity, and distribute labor to improve engagement and innovation among staff while still meeting both editorial and click-based evaluation goals.

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