Case paper: Metrics at work

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Introduction

In her book *Metrics at Work*, Angéle Christin examine how digital metrics is reshaping journalistic work practices and how the use and understanding of these metrics depend on the institutional context of the organization. Christin studied the New York based newsroom TheNotebook and Parisian LaPlace and found the use and understanding of metrics developed differently in the two workplaces. She found that despite living in a time of standardization, digital metrics reinforced cultural differences. With the rise of metrics, a new click-based form of evaluation emerged, clashing with the editorial mode of evaluation. The fine-grated data is different from previous measures. It can target specific articles and writers in a given newsroom and is now used as a measure for workers' performance. TheNotebook and LaPlace faced the same dilemma of having to find the right balance between using click-based and editorial evaluation to assess their employees, yet they implemented entirely different practices to do just that. This essay will, through the work of Angéle Christin, underpin why that is the case by comparing and analyzing the different work practices and organizational powers. Additionally, it will present an alternative perspective to view the case, and lastly, suggest which practices could be implemented to overcome the challenges that newsrooms face. This paper aims to analyze how cultural differences produce different institutional contexts and affect the use and understanding of digital metrics in online journalism.

Comparing work practices at *TheNotebook* and *LaPlace*

Firstly, the culture at TheNotebook and LaPlace, respectively, are in stark contrast to each other, influencing their different work practices. In this paper, culture will be defined as according to John Van Maanen: "culture refers to the knowledge members of a given group are thought to more or less share; knowledge of the sort that is said to inform, embed, shape, and account for the routine and not-so-routine activities of the members of the culture […]" (1988: 3, as cited in Hatch, 2018:

194). The Parisian newsroom, LaPlace, embody the French laissez-faire spirit, with regular

cigarette and coffee breaks on the building's rooftop, small talk in the office and informal meetings

(Christin, 2020: 117). This culture contributes to a more unstructured workplace as exemplified by

Christin with her experience at the newsroom: "[…] learning only when I arrived that it [*the*

meeting] had already taken place, been cancelled, or rescheduled to another date and time" (2020:

123). Additionally, in France, journalists perceive themselves as intellectuals in charge of shaping

public opinion (Christin, 2020: 7). In LaPlace fast news are referred to as HuffPos, and the

journalists look negatively upon this type of "fast" news. "A HuffPo is when we steal… when we

write a paper based on someone else's information, with a link" (Christin, 2020: 113).

TheNotebook pride themselves with having an editorial identity as a publication that is smart,

original, with a distinctive voice (Christin, 2020: 104). With the rising of the "fast" and "slow", all

of the writers took a stance between the two, creating a division within the organization: "[…] but

we're on our own, we have to be faster. It's not like them, they're slower, they take more time

editing" and "some people on staff are just "*slow Notebook,*" they don't want to do the fast stuff"

(Christel, 2020: 105). By looking at the interview excerpts, it is clear to see that there is a clear *'us

vs. them'* culture at TheNotebook. A stark contrast to LaPlace where the employees are more

unified, as will be further explained in the following section.

An area where the difference between the two newsrooms is strikingly apparent is in the division of

labor (Christin, 2020: 11). The term division of labor refers to the process of distributing the work

and responsibilities of the organization among the workers, where each employee performs one task

which contributes to the final output (Hatch, 2018: 108). The goal of having a strong division of

labor is for the production to be as efficient and effective as possible. A strong division of labor is

also what characterize the New York based newsroom, TheNotebook. In the New York office, the

roles and tasks are clearly distributed between the staff writers and editors. The editors rarely

publish any articles of their own and are solely responsible for deciding which topics should be

covered to make sure the traffic numbers are satisfactory and also, coming up with headlines for

articles written by the staff writers (Christin, 2020: 107). At the writers' level there is an additional

division of labor. At TheNotebook, the writers are grouped into "fast" writers, responsible for

writing the short "blog" posts with breaking news, and "slow" writers, in charge of writing the

lengthier articles. The strong division of labor at TheNotebook is in stark contrast to LaPlace. The

Parisian newsroom is characterized by flexibility rather than division of labor (Christin, 2020: 114).

The flexibility of the organization is reflected in the way they distribute the work. No one is

responsible for one specific type of post, rather, the writers and editors alternate between writing the

different types (Christin, 2020: 114). An example of this can be found in the way the staff writers

encourage the editor-at-large to take on an article: "André, you *have* to write this HuffPo! Only you

can do this, it's going to be so good!" (Christin, 2020: 115). It is clear that the two newsrooms

approach work distribution quite differently, and to understand why that is, it is necessary to have a

further look into the workplace hierarchies and structures of the two newsrooms.

The hierarchies at TheNotebook and LaPlace differ greatly, and the different practices is reflected

in the way the two newsrooms structure their organizations. TheNotebook is an extremely

hierarchical workplace with vertical hierarchy and centralization (Christin, 2020: 107). The top-

editors are exactly that; the top. Beneath them, there is the rest of the editorial team, followed then

by the staff writers. However, there is a clear distinction between the "fast" and "slow" writers,

where the latter are seen as a more prestigious position within the organization (Christin, 2020:

109). The work of the "fast" writers are perceived as having less editorial value: "The blog posts are

just less… I mean, you can make a single point in a blog post and that's fine. […] There is more of

a high bar for the articles than the blog posts" (Christin, 2020: 110). LaPlace does not embody the same sort of hierarchy. Everyone is expected to collectively participate in feeding the site, regardless of age, professional status, or employment history (Christin, 2020: 115). There is very little distinction between editors and writers at LaPlace, and this flat hierarchy enables the flexibility of the employees as described in previous paragraph. The different hierarchies of the two newsrooms are reflected in the structure of their workplaces and homepages. At TheNotebook, the vertical hierarchy is reflected in the seating arrangements, with the editors' offices having the best location in the building and the staff writers sitting in open space cubicles in the middle of the room (Christin, 2020: 109), meanwhile their homepage illustrates the priority of the long articles and the negligence of the blog posts (Christin, 2020: 111). At LaPlace, everyone sits together in an open space editors and writers alike (Christin, 2020: 116), contributing to the flat structure and decentralization of the organization and the feeling of equality between the employees and managers. This is also reflected in their homepage where the longer articles are no more prioritized than any of other types (Christin, 2020: 118), reinforcing the organizational structure and flat hierarchy that is already visible in every other aspect of the organization.

Subsequently, by looking into the work practices and organizational dynamics of the two newsrooms, it is possible to determine and analyze the form of organizational power enforced at the two workplaces and understand what role metrics play as a tool for control.

Organizational power and the role of metrics

TheNotebook draws on a bureaucratic form of power which influences the way in which metrics are used for control. TheNotebook's work practices; a strong division of labor, clear hierarchies, and visible distinction between the "fast" and "slow" departments reveals how the New York based

newsroom resemble the bureaucratic type of power system in their organization. Bureaucratic

power can be explained as type of power, where the power structure is centralized with fixed

sanctions and rules in place in case of infringement (Christin, 2020: 120). The concept of

bureaucratic power stems from Max Weber's theory of bureaucratic authority. He explains that a

clear hierarchy is necessary in bureaucracies, and it enables the higher positions in the organization

to make decisions and reward and punish those positioned lower in the hierarchy (Hatch, 2018:

109). Moreover, bureaucratic authority permits those in charge to control the performances of their

employees and direct them in whichever direction they like. This is showcased at TheNotebook in

the way they have implemented work practices with strong boundaries between what Christin

describes as click-based and editorial evaluation, and the way that they use metrics to control the

output produced by the staff writers. The editors of TheNotebook kept traffic metrics and editorial

goals separate (Christin, 2020: 12). As a result, the writers working on the "slow Notebook" did not

find metrics relevant for their evaluation as a writer and understood the results of metrics as

"fragmented, commodified and irrelevant for professional evaluation" (Christin, 2020: 12). Thus,

metrics were used to strengthen the already existing boundaries between the two sides of the

organization (Christin, 2020: 123). The editors segmented and compartmentalized the online public

to fit with their own distinction between the "slow Notebook" and the "fast Notebook". The

centralized authority operated through their bureaucratic power and used the metrics as a measure

of performance to control their employees and their performances by setting strict guidelines for the

writers to follow.

LaPlace enforce a different type of organizational power, called disciplinary power, which

influences the way in which metrics are used to control. Disciplinary power is a theory created by

Foucault and is explained as a power that resides within the practices and routines of an

organization and relies on internalization and self-administration (Christin, 2020: 120). Most people who work under an organization with disciplinary power do not realize they are being controlled; it is a less visible type of power compared to bureaucratic power. Organizations with disciplinary power are characterized by having a flat hierarchy with internalized pressures in order to be productive (Christin, 2020: 120). This type of power aligns almost perfectly with the way LaPlace is structured. Because of the unstructured and flexible workplace at LaPlace, the understanding and meaning of metrics took quite a different form in the Parisian newsroom than it did at TheNotebook. As a consequence of weak specialization with little to none internal boundaries, the two modes of evaluation (click-based and editorial) became intertwined with one another. This in turn, affected the way the LaPlace employees thought of traffic metrics. Both editors and writers had conflicting opinions on metrics. They saw them as a poor measure to base decisions on, but at the same time, they were constantly paying attention to algorithms and showed concern for the number of page views (Christin, 2020: 122). This resulted in a disciplinary system where the writers internalized the pressure to maximize that traffic (Christin, 2020: 12). It can therefore be argued that in LaPlace's situation, metrics function as what Foucault determined as an incarceration practice. Meaning, surveillance leads to self-surveillance (Hatch, 2018: 318). Because the writers worry that they *might* be evaluated of the metrics, they make sure to monitor themselves according to the metrics in order to stay ahead. They disciplined themselves into being more productive, both editorial and traffic wise.

A different approach

If I were to conduct research on the two newsrooms, TheNotebook and LaPlace, I would apply the modernist perspective to carry out my research, supplemented with some aspects of the symbolic-interpretive perspective. The modernist perspective aim at detecting universal laws and principles

governing organizational behavior (Hatch, 2018: 18). Specifically in my research, I would choose to examine how the organizational culture of the two newsrooms are influenced by their different environments and how that affect their use of metrics. I would do this by applying two sets of cultural analyses of the organizations as well as an analysis of the types of power enforced by the organizations. As Christin brought up in her research; the two newsrooms have much in common. Both went under the same transformation of trying to take advantage of the internet to revolutionize journalism (2020: 10). But, as it has been made clear in this paper, they took very different approaches to solve this problem. I believe that the reason why TheNotebook and LaPlace use metrics differently and implemented different work practices, is because each of them were being responsive to their environments, which are very different.

Firstly, to prove my hypothesis, I would examine the national cultures of the United States and France to showcase how the two newsrooms organizational cultures are influenced by their national culture, which in turn affect their implementations of work practices and perception on metrics. I would do that by applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Hofstede's work was carried out in the 1970's, however, much of his data still holds to this day and has been continued to be developed by other researchers (Hatch, 2018: 199). However, this analysis would act as foundational work, creating a general understanding of the two newsrooms' underlying behavior. Because Hofstede's cultural dimensions are very generalizing, further analysis are needed to properly understand how their organizational cultures affect their perception and use of metrics. To do this, I have chosen to apply Hatch's theory of cultural dynamics. Stemming from modernist thinker Schein's three levels of culture, Hatch has, to accommodate the symbolic-interpretive perspective, decided to add symbols as a fourth element of the model (Hatch, 2018: 212). The symbolic-interpretive perspective makes it possible to interpret symbols within the organization to reveal the organizational culture

through assumptions, values, artifacts, and symbols (Hatch, 2018: 18), and is therefore useful for the purpose of this research. Knowing the culture of each newsroom, provides us with a foundation for further understanding why LaPlace and TheNotebook has chosen the work practices they have, but also why metrics symbolize different things in the two organizations. Additionally, it would also be relevant to analyze the types of power used in the newsrooms to understand how they make use of metrics, similarly to the method of the author, Angéle Christin.

Christin's approach is somewhat different to the one I would conduct. Firstly, the author has used the symbolic-interpretive perspective as her point of departure. As explained in the previous paragraph, the symbolic-interpretive perspective emphasizes symbolic meanings and believes that the key to understanding organizations and how they operate is to immerse yourself into the everyday practices and processes of the organization you are studying, known as ethnographic research (Hatch, 2018: 11). She carried out 4 years of ethnographic research to analyze the case. Her focus is on how the symbolic meaning of metrics depend on the institutional context and culture of the organization (Christin, 2020: 4). Additionally, Christin conceptualizes metrics as "symbolic resources that can be negotiated, contested, and used in different ways depending on their institutional context" (2020:4). Her approach carries some similarities to the one I would adopt. Christin also emphasizes the importance of cultural differences to explain why metrics take on different symbolic meanings in the two newsrooms. However, a point where I believe Christin's approach could be improved is by further linking the national cultures to the organizational one, since it does affect the values within the organization, and consequently, affects the implementation of work practices.

The best of both worlds

LaPlace and TheNotebook's organizations could not be any more different. Each have tried in different ways to accommodate the dilemma of navigating between the editorial and click-based mode of evaluation by implementing different work practices in their organizations. As Christin explains, ideally all great articles should score high on both types of evaluations, but this is almost never the case (2020:5). I argue, neither newsroom have been 100 percent successful in managing their organization to adapt to this challenge. At LaPlace, the major problem has been their severe lack of structure. The lack of specialization and division of labor between their workers has created a chaotic workplace where the writers fail to produce any form of quality in both their fast and slow articles, because they struggle to keep switching back and forward between their HuffPos and longer investigating articles (Christin, 2020: 119). At TheNotebook, everything seems to run smoothly with their bureaucratic approach. However, the strong hierarchy and symbolic boundaries in place at TheNotebook has created a cleft right down the middle of the organization between the fast and slow writers, where the fast writers face lesser benefits and suffer more side-glances from their 'peers' (Christin, 2020: 109). This contributes to a '*us vs. them*' culture in the newsroom, which makes cooperation and sharing ideas harder between departments, apprehending the writers in utilizing their abilities to the fullest while simultaneously hindering possibilities for innovation. Thus, flexibility in work assignments and strong hierarchy are not practices I would recommend a newsroom to implement.

However, there are practices from the two newsrooms which have improved the organizations and helped figure out how to distinguish between editorial and traffic goals. If I were to consult a newsroom on how to improve their organization and effectively manage and utilize metrics in their daily work, I would suggest a combination of the practices implemented at LaPlace and

TheNotebook. Firstly, I would recommend implementing specialization and division of labor as a work practice, similar to that at TheNotebook, since it has proven to be a clever measure to divide the writers into the fast and slow articles, so both article types are being prioritized by the ones writing them, creating better results than what we see at LaPlace. Secondly, the flat hierarchy and decentralization at LaPlace created a workplace where staff-writers are allowed to express their opinions to the editors and colleagues alike, which we only can assume contributes to increased employee satisfaction and mental-health since they get to use their creativity and problem-solving skills. This would influence the way the newsroom uses and perceive metrics in their daily work. Metrics are valuable tools to measure the relevance of articles, both fast and slow, and the use of them as measures of performance should not vary between the departments. I would therefore recommend applying them equally between the departments to ensure both employee well-being and quality of output.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has analyzed how cultural differences produce different institutional contexts and affect the use and understanding of digital metrics in online journalism. The two newsrooms differ greatly in the way they structure and manage their organization. In New York, the bureaucratic culture constructed symbolic boundaries and strong hierarchies that characterized the organization of TheNotebook. LaPlace was defined by their disciplinary structure with no specialization or internal boundaries, stemming from their informal, start-up like culture at the organization. Alternatively, the case could be analyzed with a modernist perspective, adding another dimension on how national culture influence the organizational one. Lastly, this paper suggested the use of specialization, division of labor, flat hierarchy, and decentralization to change the way the newsroom use and understand metrics to create the best possible work environment.

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