

Book Review

Petre, Caitlin. 2021. *All the News That's Fit to Click: How Metrics Are Transforming the Work of Journalists*. Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press

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The book opens with a leaked story from *Business Insider* about an internal slide deck from AOL called “The AOL Way” in 2011 (p. 1). Within one of the slide decks from the AOL Way, it asks writers and editors from *Business Insider* to consider a content generation process that contains four factors when deciding which topic to cover, and they are: traffic potential (i.e., editors’ estimate, with the help of an algorithmic prediction tool, of how many pageviews each ‘piece of content’ would generate); profit potential (the estimated amount of money a piece of content would cost to produce versus how much advertising revenue

it was likely to bring in); turnaround time; and, finally, ‘editorial integrity.’ One can immediately observe that the content generation process is basically a flowchart that tells journalists exactly what they are supposed to do to produce journalism. And in fact, if one goes deeper into the slide deck, one will see that each step within the flowchart has more steps of instructions with other slides devoted to it, and so on.

The AOL Way slide was received with abject horror by journalists, and many journalists felt that way because the vision of journalism that the AOL Way is advocating represents a new yet terrifying type of managerial interference in editorial work (p. 2). That

is to say, the AOL Way implies that to be successful or even survive as a digital media company, journalism needs to be transformed into a type of labor that is completely rationalized and standardized.

Yet behind this relentless digital metrics-driven content optimization, AOL was, in fact, taking a page out of a century-old managerial playbook, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, written by a mechanical engineer named Frederick Taylor (p. 2). In this book, Taylor argues that if managers want to make factory work more efficient, they need to pay more attention to the labor process. That is, they need to start paying more attention to how work is organized and managed down to the smallest detail.

So, Taylorism became associated with time studies in which managers would try to break down a particular work into its smallest component, then figure out how to optimize and streamline each component to make sure that each worker is carrying out these micro-tasks appropriately. Therefore, through this scientific management, the work becomes more profitable by becoming more efficient. However, journalists managed to stay relatively untouched by these micro-management techniques in the twentieth century, until now (p. 3). Professor Petre suggests that we start to see the work of journalism be broken up into essentially micro tasks according to the AOL way, much in the same way that Taylorism did to the factory work.

This change occurred for many reasons. One of the most important reasons the book focuses on is the rise of analytics tools such as Google Analytics, Chartbeat, Parsley, and Quantcast. These tools measure in a very detailed way how each online reader interacts with the news that they are reading (p. 5). For example, these tools often show in real-time

how many readers click on a particular story, how many comments on it, what their comments are, and how many are sharing it. The tools can get more detail than that. Many of them can even show how many seconds an average reader spends reading a story before they drop off, and they can show how far down the page of an article readers scroll before they click on something else. Not only do these measurements exist, some news organizations even display these traffic numbers on a giant flat-screen in the office on the wall so that it can remind writers how good their works are (p. 171).

So, analytical tools started to play an important role in many newsrooms around 2011. What Petre is trying to understand is what kind of effects these tools have on journalists and the process of doing journalism. Hence, she conducted ethnographic research and many interviews at three companies that were really at the center of these questions about the role of metrics in news production.

The analytics tool she chose to research is Chartbeat, a prominent tech start-up specializing in creating real-time web analytics tools specifically for journalists. What Petre intended to investigate is how metrics produced by Chartbeat have been interpreted and used in distinct organizational contexts. One of the new organizations she chose to study is *The New York Times*, a media famous for its prestige and journalistic professionalism. To contrast the status of *The New York Times*, Petre also did five months of interview fieldwork at *Gawker Media*, an independent network of blogs that became known for taking great pleasure in breaking the boundaries of traditional journalism. Even though *Gawker* and *The New York Times* are two very different news organizations, they both use the same analytics tool, Chartbeat.

The book's findings suggest these points: first, Petre argues that metrics tools enable management to extract increased productivity from journalists, and they do this while obfuscating the role of management in this work speedup. According to Petre, many journalists at *Gawker* are addicted to Chartbeat, and they admitted that they could not stop looking at the score from Chartbeat (p. 50). The more journalists at *Gawker* looked at Chartbeat, the harder they worked because they wanted to beat their traffic scores and their colleagues' traffic scores, and this could simply be some sort of editorial optimization or just writing more blog posts. The crucial thing was that Chartbeat makes writers at *Gawker* work harder and harder, but interestingly, they do not perceive production pressure from managerial interference. Instead, these writers feel like they are putting pressure on themselves because they are the ones that are looking at Chartbeat for the traffic level (p. 66).

So far, this might seem like a depressing story of managerial control. But, Petre went beyond a simple story of managerial domination because the meaning of newsroom metrics was highly ambiguous (p. 111-112). What does that number Chartbeat produce mean? There is rarely a definitive, objective answer to the question of whether a certain number of page views for a news article is good or bad because there are so many confounding factors that contribute to the final outcomes. For instance, the subject of the story varies, the day and time of publication vary, the news cycle that a story is competing with, the amount of promotion a story receives, and then most importantly, the opacity of the social media platform algorithms that plays a huge role in determining how much distribution and visibility and news story gets. Accordingly, there were a lot of comments like this during the interview at *Gawk-*

er, which implies there is enormous uncertainty about what metrics mean and what to do with them (p. 100). And what, in effect, happens is that a lot of interpretive labor is required to make sense of metrics and tell a story with them that is meaningful to the newsroom. The ability to perform this interpretive labor correctly, to decide what a particular metric means and what should be done about it, and to make others in the newsroom accept your interpretation as legitimate has become a really important and contested form of power in the digital news organizations that journalists did not have before. And these struggles played out in different ways depending on specifically the kind of organizational culture and power structure of that newsroom. That is why it is important in the book that Petre compares *Gawker Media's* working culture with *The New York Times*'.

Based on the book, *The New York Times* is a very hierarchical news organization. This meant that the editors at *The New York Times* restricted reporters' access to the metrics because editors of *The New York Times* did not want reporters using metrics to challenge their editorial authority and to question their editorial decisions (p. 140-142). Whereas at *Gawker*, where writers had ample access to metrics, writers sometimes did just that. They would leverage their traffic numbers as a way to advocate for raises or promotions, especially if they had a boss that was somewhat skeptical of whether they should get those things. In other words, Petre shows that metrics become mobilized within these organizational power struggles. Therefore, on the one hand, while metrics did extract increased productivity, on the other hand, the metrics also provide an alternative evaluative framework for writers and reporters to understand their work and understand their worth.

Toward the end of the book, Petre states that metrics serve as an ever-present reminder that journalism is work. She argues that it is important to acknowledge journalism is work because, between the 1990s and 2000, many critical media scholars lamented the pervasiveness of what they call enterprise discourse in creative and knowledge sectors like journalism. According to the enterprise discourse, workers should be happy to accept the offered payment and potentially a precarious career trajectory because they are doing what they love, and they are lucky to be there. And up until early 2015, this kind of enterprise discourse was still very common in the digital journalism industry. The book references an article published by *The Washington Post* called "Why Internet Journalists Don't Organize" (p. 190). The reporter in the article argues that one of the reasons is generational. Millennial journalists have this neoliberal, individualistic idea of work and their careers. They have built these personal brands largely based on quantitative web map metrics that they can transfer as an individual to another company at will. Consequently, they do not need to be in solidarity with other journalists. But, four months later, in 2015, something interesting happened: *Gawker Media* became the first digital media company to unionize. And then, after that, there was a massive wave of unionization. Six-

ty-plus digital newsrooms in the US have unionized since *Gawker* did it in 2015. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this wave of unionization and how much this wave of unionization debunks the conventional wisdom about young digital journalists that was very common at the time.

The book itself is fascinating because *Gawker*, which was this digital media company that was arguably most strongly associated with this oppressive metrics-driven culture, was also the first where the writers rejected this enterprise discourse and unionized. In the book's conclusion, Petre suggests that metrics, especially when displayed on a giant flat screen monitor of a newsroom on the wall above writers as they write, is a symptom of the precariousness of their careers. In other words, she argues that metrics inadvertently make it harder for journalists and knowledge workers in other fields to ignore that what they do is work, however creative or prestigious or autonomous it may seem, however passionately they often feel about it. It is work, and that heightened awareness and as far as it can lead to demands for greater dignity or stability or equity in the workplace, which is a good reason to be cautiously hopeful about the future, even when it is saturated with metrics.

Citation

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