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Introduction

IN EARLY 2011, the website *Business Insider* published a leaked copy of “The Aol Way,” a 58-slide PowerPoint presentation that outlined Aol’s strategy for producing profitable media content in the digital age. The purpose of the slide deck was to train editorial staff at Aol’s numerous online media properties—including the politics site *Politics Daily*, the celebrity gossip site *PopEater*, and the technology blogs *TechCrunch* and *Engadget*—on their parent company’s editorial vision and approach.

The slides made clear that Aol’s management saw journalism as a type of work that could be almost entirely rationalized. Decisions and actions that previously had been left to journalists’ discretion were now to be standardized in order to maximize web traffic—and, therefore, advertising revenue. The slides instructed editors to consider four factors when deciding which topics to cover: 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.” Headlines were to include as many newsy keywords as possible to increase their chances of appearing high in search engine results, the slides explained; content should always be delivered in the “most addictive” format possible to maximize audience attention. Writers were expected to write five to ten stories per day, each of which should “be profitable” and generate at least 7,000 pageviews (a marked increase from the company’s then-average of 1,500). One memorable slide instructed journalists to “use editorial judgment & insight to determine production. [For example], if ‘Macaulay Culkin’ & ‘Mila Kunis’ are trending because they broke up → write story about Macaulay Culkin and Mila Kunis.”¹ Argue as journalists might (and have) over what constitutes “editorial

judgment,” there could be little disagreement that Aol was stretching the definition of the term to the point of absurdity.

“The Aol Way” was received with a mixture of astonishment, derision, and horror in journalism circles. A writer for *TechCrunch* called the document “a 58-page death warrant for journalists and the practice of journalism at Aol”;² a *Fortune* writer disparaged it as a “desperate” attempt to “squeeze[e] out as much profit as possible from each ‘piece of content,’ regardless of its quality.”³ One Aol journalist who was quoted anonymously in the *Business Insider* story called joining the company “the worst career move I’ve ever made.” Many journalists worried that something akin to “The Aol Way” would soon be widely taken up in the news industry. A writer for the tech site *Venturebeat* noted that while his editorial colleagues were doing a “happy dance” that they didn’t work for Aol, their relief may have been premature: “my boss . . . reports that he’s taking copious notes.”⁴

To these journalists, “The Aol Way” represented a new type of managerial interference in editorial work. Yet in advocating for relentless metrics-driven content optimization, Aol was in fact taking a page out of a century-old managerial playbook. In 1911, a mechanical engineer named Frederick Winslow Taylor published a book called *The Principles of Scientific Management*, in which he put forth a new approach to maximizing the efficiency of factory work. Taylor exhorted managers to pay close attention to the *labor process*—the way work is organized and carried out. According to Taylorism, managers should approach the shop floor with the same spirit of empirical inquiry and methodological rigor with which a scientist conducts experiments in a laboratory. Taylor encouraged managers to conduct “time studies,” in which they would break down a particular task (say, loading ingots of iron onto a railway car) into the smallest possible component parts and painstakingly hone the most efficient way to complete each one. Once he has discovered and implemented the optimal labor process, the scientific manager assigns workers to each mini-task and supervises them to ensure that work is carried out exactly as directed.

Taylor’s approach served to accomplish two ends: first, to increase the efficiency and output of the labor process (and thereby raise profits); and second, to deskill workers by transforming their craft knowledge and abilities into a series of systematized steps that could be carried out by workers who were in essence interchangeable and therefore easily replaceable. Under Taylorism, managers are responsible for conception and planning of the labor process, while workers merely execute it.⁵

The basic tenets of Taylorism spread through U.S. industrial work in the first half of the twentieth century and, later, into clerical, retail, and service work. Yet creative and knowledge workers—put simply, those whose work centers on the production, communication, and circulation of knowledge and cultural products—remained relatively insulated from scientific management tactics during this period. There are several reasons for this. First, the ability to collect and analyze relevant data on these workers' performance was comparatively limited. Second, creative and knowledge work were thought to require a higher degree of autonomy in the labor process in order to produce quality outputs. Finally, these workers typically enjoyed greater cultural and material resources than other groups, which could be mobilized to resist data-driven performance evaluation and labor discipline.⁶

Yet the layer of insulation between creative and knowledge workers and metrics-driven forms of labor discipline is now wearing thin.⁷ Digital metrics are increasingly infiltrating processes of cultural production in the music, TV, film, and book publishing industries, as well as many types of labor typically conceptualized as knowledge work, such as medicine, political campaigning, and urban planning. The growing role of metrics in these fields has prompted heated debate: big data enthusiasts predict that metrics will render knowledge work more effective, efficient, and democratic;⁸ skeptics worry that metrics will undermine professional judgment and artistic creativity, with dire results.⁹ Their differences notwithstanding, both sides agree that metrics are becoming more influential in the knowledge workplace. Still, we know surprisingly little about exactly what *kind* of influence are they having. To discover that, we must examine metrics in situ: how are they produced, interpreted, and put to use by social actors, and with what implications for the future of knowledge work?

This book sets out to answer that question, via a close look at the role of metrics in U.S. digital journalism. The contemporary commercial news media confronts several challenges that, taken together, suggest that the journalism labor process is a prime candidate for a radical metrics-driven transformation. The biggest problems are economic: deregulation in the 1990s led to a wave of corporate consolidation in the news business that has continued largely unchecked—if not at times actively encouraged—by the Federal Communications Commission.¹⁰ Meanwhile, as large technology platforms like Google and Facebook have become a primary mode of news distribution as well as the dominant force in the online advertising business, many news organizations have seen their revenues plummet. The combination of corporate consolidation and platform dominance has led to fewer and smaller

newsrooms, especially at the local level, and a more concentrated media landscape.¹¹ As “The Aol Way” so vividly demonstrated, corporate news organizations facing slim-to-nonexistent profit margins may seek to intensify labor discipline by placing a growing emphasis on performance metrics.

Cultural challenges have accompanied the economic ones—namely, growing skepticism and distrust toward the news media on the part of the American public.¹² Even before President Trump’s highly publicized attacks on the professional news media, the number of Americans who expressed “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of trust in newspapers and television news dropped ten percentage points from 2006 to 2016.¹³ This, too, seems to point toward a bigger role for audience metrics in the production of journalism: as historian Theodore Porter has argued, professions facing external criticism and a lack of public trust are likely to adopt standardized quantitative approaches to their work.¹⁴

If media companies have increasing motivations to integrate metrics into their editorial operations, they also have many more technological tools with which to do so. In the digital age, journalism has experienced a rapid proliferation of data about audiences’ online behavior in the form of web metrics (sometimes also referred to as analytics).¹⁵ Today’s news organizations use tools that track audiences’ behavior on websites to see how many readers navigate to a particular story, comment on it, email it to a friend, or share it on a social media platform. Analytics tools tally not only pageviews, sometimes also known as “hits” or “clicks,” which measure the number of times a particular web page has been visited, but also unique visitors (or “uniques”), which is an approximate measure of the number of distinct people who visit a page or site within a given period, usually thirty days.¹⁶ Real-time analytics “dashboards” also provide data on “scroll depth” (how far readers typically scroll down on a particular page) and “engaged time” (how long they spend looking at content, on average). Data on referral sources (where on the internet a site’s readers are coming from) and social media shares is also widely available. All told, the increase in audience-tracking affordances has been so dramatic that one newsroom analyst called it a “revolution in audience analytics.”¹⁷

This book explores how this “revolution” is reshaping editorial working conditions, newsroom power dynamics, and journalists’ relationship to and experience of their work. Put simply: What does the explosion of audience metrics mean for journalism as a form of *labor*? To answer this question, I draw on a mix of ethnographic observation and in-depth interviews conducted over a period of four years at three sites: Chartbeat, a web analytics company that specializes in metrics for newsrooms; the *New York Times*, an organization that

is working to reconcile its storied print past with the work rhythms, technologies, and economic challenges of digital journalism; and Gawker Media, a then-independent online media company that owned a network of popular blogs.

Although a substantial body of research has addressed the role of audience metrics in journalism, surprisingly little of this scholarship explicitly analyzes metrics as a form of labor discipline that shapes both the organization and lived experience of journalistic work under capitalism.¹⁸ One stream of existing research has sought to determine if and how newsroom metrics have changed the content and presentation of news.¹⁹ Another stream has investigated the impact of metrics on journalists' norms, values, and practices.²⁰ While this work at times mentions the use of metrics as a managerial tactic and form of employee performance evaluation, rarely has this been the main focus.²¹

Yet journalism is not only a set of practices. It is also a form of labor—one that has become increasingly casualized and precarious in an era of rapid technological development, technology platforms' dominance over digital advertising and media distribution, and the virtually unchecked consolidation of commercial media companies.²² Journalists' working conditions have moral significance not only in and of themselves but also because they shape the quality of the news. Following cultural sociologists David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker, we can reasonably assume that “bad work”—that is, work that is boring, insecure, isolating, excessive, and poorly compensated—is more likely to produce low-quality cultural products, while the opposite is true of “good work”—that is, work that is fairly compensated, secure, interesting, and autonomous.²³ A central premise of this book is that to understand the impact of metrics on contemporary journalism and news, as well as what the proliferation of metrics means for other forms of knowledge work, we must look closely at how the data interacts with newsroom working conditions and power dynamics.

To that end, this book examines the role of newsroom metrics in reshaping the journalistic labor process. Embarking on this study, the topic presented what struck me as an interesting puzzle. On the one hand, a long line of social science thinkers dating back to Max Weber have analyzed quantification as a rationalizing and disciplining force that can remake social realities just as much as it measures them.²⁴ In the case of journalism, by providing granular, up-to-the-second data about how audiences are responding to news content, metrics seem likely to disempower journalists as workers in two ways. First, much as Taylorism systematically deskills craft workers by separating the conception and high-level planning of work (which becomes the exclusive province of managers) from its rote execution, metrics threaten to strip journalists of the

ability to set the news agenda using their specialized sense of editorial judgment. In other words, as “The Aol Way” illustrated, metrics could facilitate a regime of scientific management in which journalists are reduced from expert arbiters of newsworthiness to mere executors tasked with unquestioningly following the dictates of quantified representations of audience popularity. Second, insofar as metrics are collectively understood to represent audience attention—and, therefore, advertising and subscription revenue—they are an intrusion of commercial considerations into the newsroom. By installing analytics dashboards, management is arguably taking a sledgehammer to the “wall” between editorial and business operations that has long been central to the notion of journalistic independence and professionalism.²⁵

On the other hand, decades of research in sociology, communication, and science and technology studies have shown that the introduction of a new technology rarely produces dramatic social change all on its own. Rather, the impact of new technologies depends on how they are used in particular social, economic, political, and organizational contexts.²⁶ In the workplace, technologically facilitated managerial regimes require both coercion *and* consent if they are to fundamentally change the labor process.²⁷ This may be especially true when quantitative tools of labor discipline are implemented in knowledge-work fields. As Hesmondhalgh and Baker write: “Workers in these *relatively* powerful and high-status forms of [professional and craft] work often have a very uneasy relationship with managers, and greater power in relation to management than many other workers.”²⁸ Journalists’ liminal professional status and the beleaguered state of the news business notwithstanding, news workers seem relatively empowered to resist scientific management tactics and the metrics-driven devaluation of their labor. The pages that follow are animated by this tension: between the known power of metrics to discipline and rationalize social behavior on one hand, and the indeterminate effects of new technologies on the other.

The Argument

In this book, I argue that newsroom metrics are a powerful form of managerial surveillance and discipline. Via a habit-forming, game-like user interface, analytics dashboards like Chartbeat extract increased productivity from rank-and-file journalists and can intensify competitive dynamics between them. However, in order to succeed commercially, analytics products must not simply discipline journalists’ work but also gain their trust and acceptance. Newsroom analytics companies do this by making technological and rhetorical

concessions to journalists' autonomy. Unlike the Taylorist manager's stopwatch to which they are sometimes compared, tools like Chartbeat are designed and marketed to forge strong emotional attachments directly with journalists, perform deference to their sense of editorial expertise, and profess allegiance to their professional norms. Such tactics facilitate metrics-driven labor discipline, insofar as they help forestall newsroom resistance against metrics.

Yet even as analytics tools function as a powerful form of labor discipline, they also represent a new patch of terrain on which newsroom power struggles unfold. Because analytics tools must leave room for the (limited) exercise of journalistic judgment, they are interpretively ambiguous technological artifacts: that is, it's often unclear what the data *means* or what should be done with it. While journalists become fixated on metrics, they also strategically *use* the numbers' ambiguous meaning to pursue their own strategic goals and even, at times, gain a measure of leverage over management. In sum, the ambiguity of newsroom metrics makes journalists more likely to consent to the rationalization of their labor while also ensuring that this rationalization proceeds only fitfully and remains incomplete.

In making this argument, I am informed by and seek to build upon three areas of scholarly research: the literature from communication and media studies on what is variously called knowledge work, media work, and cultural labor; the sociology of quantification and rationalization; and literature on metrics and the labor process. The next sections will briefly discuss each of these, in order to build the conceptual and theoretical foundations of what's to come.

The Management of Knowledge Work and Creative Labor

While this book focuses closely on the case of journalism, I also aim to provide a framework for thinking about the relationship between metrics and labor in other forms of knowledge work. Drawing on the scholarship of Vincent Mosco and Catherine McKercher, I conceptualize knowledge work as "the labor of those who handle, distribute, and convey information and knowledge"²⁹ and who, crucially, are typically understood to require the opportunity to exercise independent judgment in order to successfully carry out their work.³⁰ Under this definition fall librarians, writers, artists, researchers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, journalists, and many others.

Knowledge work is a contested concept. Some argue that by defining only certain occupations as knowledge work, we elide the ways in which *all* types of work in capitalism (1) occur under the same basic relations of production,

and (2) require the possession and communication of particular kinds of knowledge and information.³¹ While these critiques have validity, there is still value in treating knowledge-work occupations, as defined above, as a distinct object of analysis. Whether or not what is commonly characterized as “knowledge work” is in fact meaningfully different from other types of work in terms of the degree or kind of knowledge required to perform it, there exists a widespread cultural understanding that knowledge workers require a measure of aesthetic and/or professional autonomy to produce what is expected of them. Thus there is an expectation (especially among workers in and adjacent to these occupations) that so-called knowledge work be managed differently from other forms of labor.

Other scholars have criticized the concept of knowledge work as too broad to adequately analyze fields of cultural production. This group favors narrower alternatives such as creative labor, media work, cultural labor, and cultural work, which foreground the “specific importance of *culture*, of *mediated communication*, and of the *content* of communication products” with their unique “ability to shape and influence societies.”³² Yet in terms of labor process, cultural production under capitalism presents a dilemma for managers similar to that of knowledge work: the logic of capital accumulation demands a labor process that is rationalized and standardized, but the economic value of these cultural producers’ outputs derives, at least in part, from their originality, unpredictability, and ineffable aesthetic sensibility.

Cultural producers are therefore understood to require some degree of autonomy in how they carry out their work.³³ Managers in these industries must continually navigate the “art-commerce relation,” in which “artistic desires for creative autonomy and independence exist in uneasy tension with capitalist imperatives of profit-generation and controlled accumulation.”³⁴ Given that explicitly coercive management tactics are likely to inspire resistance among cultural workers—and, in stifling creativity, may prove counterproductive for the goal of creating profitable cultural products—managers rely on subtler forms of labor discipline, sometimes called “creative” or “soft” management. These include instilling an entrepreneurial sensibility in workers such that they assume and individualize the risks inherent in cultural production³⁵ and offering managerial directives as mere “guidelines” or suggestions.³⁶

Where do journalists fit into this picture? On the one hand, journalists actively produce “social meaning” in a way that positions them as cultural workers. And like other cultural workers, journalists create discrete *products*, which may make their work more likely to be mechanized and standardized than that of

professionals, like doctors, who provide an intangible *service*.³⁷ However, journalists differ from artistic-creative workers in a key respect: they “occupy jobs centered on the construction and dissemination of what might be called interpretive information or knowledge” rather than aesthetic or artistic products.³⁸ Whereas individual creativity and self-expression are idealized in artistic fields, journalism’s occupational ideology prizes considered judgment—the ability to quickly absorb, adjudicate between, and publicly communicate complex and conflicting sources of information. Furthermore, journalism is an anomalous case of cultural production in that its practitioners operate according to a set of normative, rather than artistic, commitments. As media scholar Mike Ananny puts it, “Unlike artistic fields of cultural production, the press—ideally and principally—pursues its autonomy in order to advance *public* interests.”³⁹

Therefore, while artistic workers seek *aesthetic* autonomy, journalists primarily seek *professional* autonomy—the ability to practice newswork according to a set of collective normative values and with relative insulation from political actors and the market.⁴⁰ Yet because the U.S. press is heavily commercialized, many of the management tensions and challenges are the same as those found in other forms of industrial cultural production. If aesthetic cultural work is defined by the art-commerce relation, we might say that journalism is characterized by the *democracy*-commerce relation.

In sum, placing journalism within the category of knowledge work captures the ways in which journalists are similar to *both* creative/artistic workers *and* professional workers. Indeed, the fact that journalists, perhaps uniquely, span the boundary between these two groups makes them an optimal case through which to examine the impact of metrics on knowledge work. To do so, I draw on a body of historical and sociological literature on the social determinants and impacts of quantification.

Numbers and Rationalization in the Modern World

A foundational insight of social science is that quantification—what we count and how we go about counting it—profoundly shapes the social world. Max Weber argued that the modern era was defined by a numbers-driven rationalization of the social order, in which political, economic, and cultural life are rendered increasingly calculable and predictable via measurement innovations like double-entry bookkeeping and government censuses. In a rationalized world, all forms of coordinated human action and decision making become increasingly standardized.

Weber contended that rationalization had substantial benefits, such as allowing humans to exert greater control over the natural world and facilitating more meritocratic forms of social life. Yet he also believed that rationalization posed a dangerous threat to humans' autonomy and sense of meaning. As more elements of human life were reduced to numbers, and premodern ways of understanding the world were displaced by modern science, technology, and capitalism, Weber worried that people would become disenchanting. A fully rationalized world may be more efficient, but it is ultimately oppressive—trapping us in what Weber famously referred to as the iron cage.⁴¹

Subsequent scholarship has carried forward Weber's work on rationalization, examining how numbers shape how people understand the social world and act within it. Just as some types of speech are also *actions* that produce real-world effects (such as when a wedding officiant pronounces a couple married or a gambler places a bet), producing and communicating numbers can also be a form of consequential social action.⁴²

Numbers do two things in particular that are relevant to our purposes in this book. First, numbers *commensurate*: they take two or more qualitatively different entities and render them comparable by applying to each a single numerical standard. In other words, commensuration “unites objects by encompassing them under a shared cognitive system. . . . Difference or similarity is expressed as magnitude, as an interval on a metric, a precise matter of more or less.”⁴³ Grades, college rankings, and prices are all forms of commensuration—as are newsroom metrics. While numerical rankings tend to take on an air of objectivity and straightforwardness, commensuration is in fact labor-intensive. It takes a good deal of cognitive work to figure out which entities should be considered commensurable in the first place and how they stack up against one another on a particular metric. For this reason, commensuration can also be controversial, especially when it is seen as biased, failing to consider relevant context, or otherwise inappropriate. In such cases, commensuration may be contested—as when, for example, a student complains to a professor about a grade.

As the disgruntled student example illustrates, those on the receiving end of quantitative performance evaluation are rarely passive or static. It is difficult to publicly measure something or someone without changing it or them in some way. Thus a second thing that evaluative numbers do in the social world is elicit a response from the people and organizations they measure. Scholars call this phenomenon *reactivity*. In their in-depth study of the effects of yearly law school rankings, Wendy Espeland and Michael Sauder found that schools adjusted their admissions criteria and financial aid priorities in an attempt to

improve their rank, largely to the detriment of their educational mission.⁴⁴ In this instance, the reactivity was unintentional: *U.S. News & World Report*, the magazine that published the rankings, originally envisioned them as a resource for prospective law students (and a way to boost circulation), not as a means to reform legal education. In other cases, evaluative measures are deliberately designed to be reactive, and specifically to prompt those being measured to modify their behavior in some way. Workplace performance metrics generally fall into this category, as do wearable activity monitors like the Fitbit.

While much sociological work on quantification emphasizes its power to remake the social world, some scholars have pointed out that rationalization is not actually a straightforward or linear process. Organizations may appear to adopt rationalized procedures, but these changes are often only ceremonial. In many cases, organizational actors *claim* to follow the official standardized rules in an effort to seem legitimate and efficient while continuing to carry out their day-to-day work just as they have always done it.⁴⁵ Relatedly, as a professional field becomes increasingly structured and defined, organizations within it start to mimic each other by adopting rationalized rules—not necessarily because such rules and procedures actually make organizations more effective, but because they are a way to manage uncertainty.⁴⁶ These studies suggest that while modern organizations face great pressure to *appear* rational, they may not actually conduct their affairs in a rationalized way—and, even if they do, rationalization may not streamline their operations in quite the way Weber predicted. In addition, the same metrics can take on different meanings (and thus produce dramatically different effects) depending on institutional context.⁴⁷

These nuanced findings notwithstanding, numbers-driven rationalization continues to be alternately romanticized and condemned in the so-called era of “big data.”⁴⁸ As ever-larger swaths of the social and natural world are rendered into digital data via networked technologies, big data enthusiasts have predicted that analytics will increasingly supplant biased forms of human judgment and decision making, leading to fairer, smarter, more profitable outcomes for society.⁴⁹ Others worry about the power of performance metrics to “deskill” workers, diminish people’s autonomy, and otherwise disempower them.⁵⁰

Metrics, Deskilling, and the Capitalist Labor Process

The 1970s brought renewed sociological attention to the labor process among Marxian scholars. In his classic 1974 book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman analyzed Taylorism as a form of management that systematically

“deskills” workers by eliminating from their jobs any opportunity for the exercise of specialized knowledge, judgment, or substantive skill. The result, Braverman argued, is that ever more knowledge and power become consolidated in the hands of management.⁵¹ Braverman argued that because it is a fundamental part of capitalist control over labor, deskilling would not be limited to assembly line manufacturing, service, and clerical work but would increasingly occur in the “middle layers” of employment, including nurses, teachers, engineers, accountants, technicians, “petty managers,” and, we might add, journalists.⁵²

Other scholars have added nuance to Braverman’s analysis by shifting the analytical focus from the actions of management to the subjectivity of the worker. In his classic ethnography of a factory shop floor, sociologist Michael Burawoy emphasized the importance of worker consent—as opposed to managerial coercion—in the smooth functioning of the capitalist labor process. In the machine shop Burawoy studied as a participant-observer, workers played a game in which they competed against each other to “make out,” or produce output at a rate considerably higher than the management-set quota, but not *so* high that management increased the quota. While workers who exceeded the quota earned a small bonus, the main appeal of making out was not the money but rather that doing so mitigated the tedium of the job and was a way to earn the respect of one’s coworkers. While workers thus had their own psychological and social motivations to make out, the shop-floor game led them to work harder than they otherwise would have, making them willing participants in the intensification of their own exploitation.⁵³

In short, Burawoy agreed with Braverman that the logic of capitalism requires that work become progressively more rote and less skilled. Yet he offered an important amendment to Braverman’s thesis: deskilling must leave *some* space for workers to make choices and exercise agency, lest they channel their feelings of frustration, boredom, and disempowerment into open rebellion against management. While these worker choices do not fundamentally alter the economic relationships of capitalism, they are nonetheless meaningful and worthy of analytical attention.

Whether shop-floor games and informal forms of worker resistance—such as complaining and work slowdowns—genuinely subvert managerial interests or, by contrast, inadvertently serve them by acting as a “safety valve” that forestalls more impactful forms of rebellion is a lingering question.⁵⁴ Yet some scholars have persuasively argued that this kind of either/or framing is too reductive to capture of the complexity of the capitalist labor process. Instead, managerial control and worker resistance are best understood as having a

dialectical relationship: workers have agency that allows them to meaningfully resist managerial dictates in various ways, but management will continually work to co-opt and domesticate workers' oppositional behaviors.

The chapters that follow will show how the concept of a dialectic between managerial control and worker autonomy is useful for understanding the case of metrics in newsrooms. Chartbeat's real-time newsroom metrics facilitate a regime of managerial surveillance and discipline that makes Frederick Taylor's stopwatch seem almost quaint by comparison. Yet journalists possess professional status, ample reserves of cultural capital, and a highly visible public platform—resources they can mobilize to resist metrics-driven performance evaluation if they choose to do so. For this reason, earning the trust and acceptance of rank-and-file journalists was crucial if Chartbeat was ever going to become fully institutionalized in newsrooms, but it also presented a formidable challenge. Indeed, we will see that Chartbeat expended considerable effort to win over journalists via its marketing pitch and the user-experience design of its signature newsroom analytics tool.

Chartbeat's strategy paid off handsomely: journalists became fixated on trying to increase their traffic numbers, despite reservations many of them voiced about incorporating metrics into their editorial work. In the process, they pushed themselves to work ever harder in a way that served managerial interests more than their own, even in the absence of direct or explicit coercion. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its effectiveness as a booster of worker productivity, Chartbeat has become a fixture in newsrooms in the United States and around the world.

However, this is not a simple story of managerial domination. In order to secure journalists' consent to metrics-driven monitoring, Chartbeat incorporated ambiguity into its newsroom analytics tool, leaving space for the limited exercise of editorial judgment. These design decisions in turn enabled journalists to leverage metrics in unexpected ways that at times empowered them relative to management.

The Study: Exploring Metrics at Chartbeat, the *New York Times*, and Gawker Media

At the outset of this research, I had two major exploratory questions. First, how is a newsroom analytics tool produced?⁵⁵ These products are not, after all, fully formed entities that descend upon newsrooms from on high. Rather,

analytics tools are technological artifacts whose particular features and affordances are the outcome of negotiations among a diverse set of stakeholders, including product designers, engineers, marketers, media company executives, newsroom data analysts, and journalists. Analytics tools are, in other words, the outcome of a *social process* that has significant consequences for the future of journalism, but had never been closely investigated.⁵⁶

To understand the social process that produces newsroom analytics, I knew I would need to see the inner workings of an analytics company up close, and Chartbeat soon emerged as an optimal case study. At the time of its founding in 2009, Chartbeat was the first web analytics company to specialize in audience data specifically intended for use by journalists in newsrooms. (Rivals, like Google Analytics, offered tools that originally had been designed for use in e-commerce or advertising sales.) Other start-ups soon began to emulate Chartbeat's newsroom-centered approach, but by then Chartbeat's products had saturated the news industry. By the time my research there began in August 2013, Chartbeat's tools had been taken up by more than 50,000 newsrooms in the United States and more than 60 additional countries.⁵⁷

Chartbeat specialized in "real-time" web analytics, which told newsrooms how many people were visiting their websites at that moment and what they were doing during their visits. The company's signature tool was the Chartbeat Publishing dashboard, a multicolored full-screen display that showed news organizations a wide range of metrics about their audiences: how many visitors were currently on each particular article page (aka concurrent visitors, as Chartbeat called them), the average amount of time they had been there, which internet sites referred them, how often they visited, where in the world they were located, what percentage of them were looking at the site on mobile phones, and much more. Chartbeat was also known for the Big Board, which ranked a news site's stories according to concurrent visitors and was designed to be displayed on a newsroom wall.

From August 2013 through January 2014, I spent time as a "fly on the wall" in Chartbeat's office, located in the Union Square neighborhood of New York City. Fortunately, my time there coincided with a period in which the company was in the process of designing and launching a new version of the Chartbeat Publishing dashboard (referred to internally as CPB2). I was able to witness much of this process take place. During my fieldwork, I observed internal meetings, product-testing sessions, and client trainings and meetings. I was also given a spare desk in the middle of Chartbeat's open office where I was able to hang out for hours at a time, observing the rhythms of daily office life.

In addition, I conducted 22 interviews and in-depth conversations with 16 employees who worked on a range of teams across the company.

The second question I set out to answer was this: How are analytics interpreted and put to use in actual newsrooms? Here I took a comparative approach to choosing case studies. I selected two news organizations that both subscribed to Chartbeat but differed from each other in many other significant dimensions: the *New York Times* and Gawker Media. Choosing two newsrooms that both used the same analytics tool but were otherwise quite dissimilar enabled me to see how factors like newsroom structure, organizational history and culture, business strategy, level of prestige, and journalistic style affect the way an analytics tool is taken up.

The *New York Times* is arguably the emblematic “legacy” news publication in the United States. It is one of the country’s oldest papers and has been majority-owned by a single family, the Ochs Sulzbergers, for over a century. Yet the *Times*’s unmatched prestige did not protect it from the turmoil roiling the news industry in the early twenty-first century. During the primary period of my research, 2011–15, the paper was struggling to reconcile its print-era revenue models and work routines with what journalism scholar Nikki Usher has called the “emergent news values” of the digital age, such as immediacy, interactivity, and participation.⁵⁸

The *Times*’s approach to metrics reflected this ambivalence and uneasiness. The newspaper was a long-time Chartbeat client, but top editors were reluctant to integrate it—or any analytics tool—into the editorial workflow. Rather than subscribe to Chartbeat Publishing, which was Chartbeat’s most sophisticated analytics tool and the one used by most of its high-profile clients, the *Times* subscribed only to Chartbeat “Basic,” a less expensive, stripped-down version of the tool that was typically used by much smaller news organizations and blogs. As later chapters will discuss in more detail, *Times* newsroom managers also carefully restricted access to metrics within the newsroom, such that editors and select digital staffers had access to audience data while reporters did not.

As a result, my interviewees at the *Times* had wildly different exposure to metrics depending on where they were situated in the newsroom hierarchy. Some were deeply immersed in metrics on a daily basis, while others had never so much as laid eyes on Chartbeat (one prospective interviewee professed never to have heard of it). I conducted 25 interviews with 22 newsroom staffers at the *Times*, including reporters, editors, columnists, web producers, and newsroom operations staff. While I was not permitted to conduct sustained ethnographic observation at the *Times*, many of my interviews took place

within the newsroom, which allowed me to develop a sense of the physical space and atmosphere.

If the *Times* is the paradigmatic legacy media organization, Gawker Media was the paradigmatic digital upstart. Founded in 2002 by entrepreneur Nick Denton, Gawker was a network of blogs on a range of subjects, the best known of which were *Gawker* (the company's flagship site, which focused on politics, media, and celebrity gossip), *Jezebel* (women's issues and feminism), *Deadspin* (sports), and *Gizmodo* (technology). While Gawker was mainly known for its "core" sites (in addition to the ones just listed, these included sites that covered science fiction, video games, self-help tips, and automobiles), the Gawker universe extended far beyond such titles to encompass a sprawling network of blogs—many penned by unpaid contributors—that were hosted on Kinja, the company's content-management system and publishing platform. (To limit unwieldy terminology, I use the term Gawker without italics as shorthand for Gawker Media; the blog of the same name will be referred to as *Gawker* in italics.)

By the mid-aughts, Gawker sites had become famous for their snarky tone and gleeful disregard for traditional journalistic norms, such as objectivity and the prohibition on paying for scoops. But perhaps the most notable way in which Gawker deviated from the customs of legacy journalism was its unabashed reliance on quantitative performance measures to evaluate stories, sites, and editorial staff.

Indeed, there was arguably no contemporary media organization more strongly associated with a metrics-driven editorial culture than Gawker. In sharp contrast to the *Times*, all Gawker writers and editors had access to Chartbeat, as well as another analytics tool called Quantcast. On the floor of Gawker's offices where editorial staffers worked, screens displaying metrics were positioned such that it was nearly impossible for writers and editors to avoid passing by them when they walked to the office kitchen and bathroom, or entered or exited the stairwell leading to the street. Denton had also implemented a variety of pay-for-performance systems over the years, in which writers were compensated based partly on the traffic their posts generated.

From February to August 2014, I observed internal meetings at Gawker, analyzed the company's internal memos, and interviewed 28 staff members inhabiting a variety of roles, including site leads, editors, writers, editorial fellows, and editorial and business-side executives. I also spent five days virtually "sitting in" on the online group chats of two of Gawker's sites.

Doing Slow Research in a Fast-Changing Field

Ethnographic research is something that can't be rushed. It takes time to get to know a place, its people, its rhythms. It takes time to earn subjects' trust and be granted a window into their lived experience. It takes time to write detailed field notes, transcribe interviews, and analyze the hundreds of pages of resulting text. Perhaps most importantly, it takes deep, unhurried reflection to make *sense* of what one has seen, heard, and read—to think through what the findings tell us not just about the research sites but also about the broader social world of which they are a part.

And yet, while all this time is passing, research sites stubbornly refuse to hold still—perhaps especially if they are digital technology or media companies. The technologies, organizational landscape, and economic realities of the contemporary news industry continue to change at a dizzying speed, and the firms I studied were no exception. In the years since I completed the research for this book, Gawker was bankrupted by a lawsuit and has since passed through multiple owners, the *Times* rolled out metrics more widely in its newsroom, most significantly by investing in the development of Stela, an internal analytics tool, and Chartbeat went through a major staff expansion, a subsequent staff contraction, a rebranding exercise, and a change in the CEO. Some of these shifts are highly relevant to the questions I take up in this book, others only tangentially so. The concluding chapter addresses these changes in more depth and offers some thoughts on their significance for the arguments I make in these pages.

For now, I will simply say that the ever-changing nature of the digital media industry field site need not be a liability. In fact it can be an asset, to the extent that it forces the researcher to pull their thinking to a higher level of abstraction and, in doing so, increase the analytical rigor and richness of the work. As my sites continued to change after I left the field, I was repeatedly pushed to reconsider the age-old question “what is this a case of?”—“this” being not only the particular organizations I studied but also the particular time period during which I studied them. I had no choice but to identify the broader, deeper themes that would not be rendered irrelevant by the latest newsroom restructuring or the launch of a new technological tool.

This book is, like all ethnographic research, a snapshot—but it's not a random one. It reveals a moment in the development of digital media when metrics were thoroughly institutionalized in some newsrooms (like Gawker) and still working their way into others (like the *Times*). If our goal is to understand

exactly *how* tools of rationalization and labor discipline become entrenched in knowledge workplaces, and with what consequences, we could hardly hope for a better picture at which to look.

Plan of the Book

The book contains seven chapters. Chapter 1 continues to lay the foundation for what is to come: I examine journalism's normative and empirical specificities as a case, and argue that journalists' working conditions and labor process deserve more scholarly attention than they typically receive. I then provide an overview of the institutional context and history of the three sites I studied for this book, with particular focus on where they fit into the broader journalism field in the United States.

The remainder of the book is divided into three parts. Part I takes a close look at the kind of "user experience," to borrow a term from the tech industry, that analytics tools create for journalists. Chapter 2 argues that real-time newsroom analytics tools are designed to be habit-forming by mimicking key features of addictive games. This game-like user experience extracted increased productivity from journalists by making them feel they were locked in a relentless competition against their coworkers and themselves to achieve ever-higher metrics.

Although many journalists found Chartbeat addictive, it could also feel tedious, demoralizing, and meaningless. Some Chartbeat staffers worried that these negative feelings might inspire resistance to the tool, which would in turn pose problems for the analytics company's ability to sign and retain clients. Thus chapter 3 examines how Chartbeat sought to make metrics feel unthreatening and meaningful to journalists—by professing allegiance to journalistic values, performing deference to journalistic judgment, and including design elements that tapped into ideas of magic, mystery, and transcendence.

If part 1 focuses on the experience of using tools like Chartbeat, part 2 explores how journalists interpret the data. Chapter 4 details the ways in which, despite their reputation for dictating clear takeaways, metrics are interpretively ambiguous in three ways: it is often unclear what the data mean, why articles get the traffic they do, and which actions should be taken based on metrics. Chapter 5 illustrates how, in the face of this ambiguity, journalists seek to draw firm, if at times seemingly arbitrary, symbolic boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate uses of metrics. Drawing on concepts from social anthropology and the sociology of work, I argue that some forms and uses of audience

data become categorized as “clean”—that is, they harness the potential of metrics while containing the threat to journalism’s professional identity—while others are categorized as “dirty” or contaminating.

Part 3 of the book examines how metrics interact with existing newsroom hierarchies and managerial regimes. Chapter 6 explains when, how, and why editors restricted access to some metrics and strategically invoked others in the process of managing journalistic labor. Chapter 7 explores the ways in which newsroom metrics intersected with journalists’ diverging perceptions of professional autonomy at the *New York Times* and Gawker, as well as the material consequences of these intersections.

After summarizing the book’s main arguments, the conclusion discusses how each field site has changed since my research ended and offers thoughts on how these changes speak to the book’s claims. In the conclusion I also consider the implications of my findings for other forms of knowledge work facing an influx of digital metrics. Finally, appendix A provides insight about the process by which I obtained access to my field sites and the methods I employed while in the field; appendix B offers a detailed guide to the Chartbeat Publishing analytics dashboard.

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