

Angèle Christin:
Metrics at work:
Journalism and the contested meaning of algorithms
Princeton, 2020

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MedieKultur 2020, 69, 139-142

Published by SMID | Society of Media researchers In Denmark | www.smid.dk

The online version of this text can be found open access at <https://tidsskrift.dk/mediekultur>

Within the field of journalism research, there has been an academic interest in how news is both produced and selected by journalists. Hence, a large body of literature has over the years documented a completely absent concern for the audiences inside the newsrooms, most famously documented in the newsroom study by Herbert Gans. He argued that “neither the journalists nor the business departments know how to enlarge the audience” (Gans, 1979, p. 217). The study by Gans was part of the first wave of newsroom ethnographies, which were some of the first studies to begin to understand journalistic production and practice and the decisions behind what became news.

However, many years later, when the news in the '90s began to move online and increased access to audience data and metrics became available, this changed how such decisions were made. This led to a range of studies addressing how audience metrics influence editorial choices and the gatekeeping processes inside the newsroom, where suddenly tensions arose in relation to both how journalists cater for what the audience wants to know (represented in metrics) and what the journalists think the audience should know (Ali & Hassoun, 2019; Anderson, 2011; Møller Hartley, 2013; Tandoc, 2014). These questions of how news is produced and the inbuilt tension between metrical and editorial logics is also at the heart of Angèle Christin's *Metrics at work: Journalism and the contested meaning of algorithms*.

Building on newsroom ethnography, and thereby following in the footsteps of Gans, Tuchmann, Epstein and others, Christin asks how metrics are discussed, contested and

put to a variety of uses in a newsroom today. She does so by entering two similar newsrooms but on two different continents. Between 2011 and 2015, she conducted fieldwork in the offices of *The Notebook* and *La Place* (names invented for reasons of anonymity). As the book unfolds, it becomes clear that the pursuit of clicks looks remarkably different in the US and France; furthermore, Christin reveals how American and French journalists are reproducing cultural differences in a time of economic and technological convergence.

In the introductory chapter, Christin sets the scene, introducing the main concepts and arguments. It is shown that metrics should be seen as symbolic resources, and the longstanding tension between commercial markets and editorial logics is reinforced with the fine granular knowledge of audience preferences. The chapter also introduces the concept of algorithmic publics, which Christin argues are the entities in the click-based modes of evaluation in the newsroom. These, she convincingly shows throughout the book, are different in the US and France. To choose such different sites is useful for the analytical framework. It enables Christin to show how, despite similar data infrastructures, the interpretation and local implementation of metrics and analytics matters. Hence, Christin shows how this affects the cultures in which journalists are embedded in different ways.

The theoretical framework is Pierre Bourdieu's fieldwork, mainly the concept of journalistic fields as having two opposite poles, namely the internal journalistic forms of capital and the external economic forms of capital. This serves as a useful lens for situating the analysis of journalistic practices in the broader context of journalistic cultures. Thus, the countries function as extreme cases, as the journalistic cultures in these two countries have developed rather different definitions of professional autonomy. The field theoretical framework could have been useful in other parts of the analysis—for example, analysing the forms of capital, dominating and dominated forms of logics, and challenging and preserving journalistic values. Later in the book, boundary work (Carlson & Lewis, 2015; Gieryn, 1983) is introduced to analyse what is happening inside the newsroom, as metrics become increasingly important in the long period over which Christin follows the two media outlets. The advantage of the field theoretical lens is that it allows the author to trace the differences in how metrics are received and adopted, avoiding technological determinism in that process. What the book is perhaps sacrificing for these in-depth ethnographic and very convincing descriptions is theoretical depth. For the reader, the 'civic' and the more 'segmented' understanding of audiences is somewhat unclear, or how exactly the 'intellectual' ideal unfolds among French journalists and relates to the existing forms of capital in the two journalistic fields. Are the forms of capital changing with the metrification of the newsroom? Also, the catchy concept of algorithmic publics could have been unfolded more in the book. As readers, we understand that algorithmic publics are algorithmic representations of collectives of audiences, but it is not entirely clear how they change journalistic practices, as the analysis indicates path dependency more than change.

This analytical comparative framework does, however, enlighten the historization of the field presented in Chapters 2 and 3. Chapter 2 focuses more on overall changes in the

media market while Chapter 3 zooms in on the history of two specific media outlets. The history is informed by interviews with current and former staff, and very concretely shows how new technologies and old journalistic cultures meet and transform the idea of 'the public' in that process.

In Chapter 4, Christin dives into the culture of numbers and the constant negotiations and different understandings of what she terms click-based evaluation and editorial evaluation, showing how the financial challenges for online journalism from 2008 on led both newsrooms to adhere more and more to click-based evaluation. Fine-grained observations and honest interviews support the argument, telling the story in such a way that Christin invites the reader not only into the newsroom but also into the minds of journalists and editors during the hardship of commercial competition in their attempts to serve their audiences as publics, not just customers. This is a struggle which can likely be transferred to many other media organizations around the globe and which has only intensified in the last ten years.

Chapter 5 looks at the symbolic resources in the newsrooms and how the metrics reinforce the division between slow and fast pace in journalism, which is seen not only in roles and titles, but also in the physical structure of the newsroom and the website interfaces. Interestingly, we see how the newsroom in Paris is less hierarchical and flexible, but the journalistic production is messier as a consequence. Christin explores these differences in a Foucauldian framework, in particular the bureaucratic and disciplined forms of power. She argues that disciplinary power operates in the Parisian newsroom, while the New York newsroom is characterized by bureaucratic power structures, in turn shaping their algorithmic publics differently. In New York, the public is conceptualized as commodified, segmented and largely irrelevant. In Paris, the conception of the public is more conflictual as both commodified and civic. Interestingly, Christin shows with this in-depth ethnographic work how data are reinforcing the existing organizational structures within and between organizations.

This book is essential for anyone working with newsroom ethnography as a method, and its in-depth and carefully layered analysis is a must for anyone interested in the sociological analysis of organizations, journalism, and the influence of new technologies on journalistic practices. Although the book gives the reader a rare view inside newsrooms, the reader is left with the question of what this means for journalism and for journalistic values, and in essence how these differences in the understanding and interpretation of metrics are (re)producing vastly different journalistic content.

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