

Management by Metrics Is Upending Newsrooms and Killing Journalism

Designed to discipline workers into producing clickable and profitable content, newsroom analytics are radically changing the nature of media work — and hastening journalism’s ugly decline.

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Review of All the News That’s Fit to Click: How Metrics Are Transforming the Work of Journalists by Caitlin Petre (Princeton University Press, 2021)

Journalism is in crisis. The past two decades have seen tens of thousands of newspaper jobs vanish and hundreds of communities become [news deserts](#). Run-amok commercialism continues to hollow out and distort our news media in increasingly dangerous ways. Yet, despite such worrying signs, the precise contours of these structural transformations often escape scrutiny, and it’s often unclear what’s truly new. After all, profit-driven media have *always* underserved and misrepresented large segments of society along socioeconomic divides. Informational redlining is baked into the very DNA of a commercial press that [privileges profits](#) over people.

What we’re witnessing today, however, is the late-stage decay of advertising-dependent, market-driven journalism. Many of the most visible maladies — the feeding frenzies of vulture capitalist hedge funds, the far-right propagandists exploiting news vacuums, the platform monopolies voraciously devouring ad revenue and amplifying misinformation — are opportunistic parasites exacerbating the crisis, not the root cause. The entire commercial structure is rotten to its core, and the far-reaching implications of this decomposition, especially for those working toward a more democratic future, have yet to be fully appraised.

While the symptoms of commercial media’s structural pathologies are legion, one that’s increasingly visible and yet under-studied is how the desperate search for ever-diminishing revenues worsens labor conditions — which in turn degrades journalists’ well-being, the content they produce, and society writ large.

Caitlin Petre, a media sociologist at Rutgers University, has published a timely and important book that vividly captures these transmogrifications. Her engagingly written and deeply researched [All the News That's Fit to Click: How Metrics Are Transforming the Work of Journalists](#) exposes a particularly glaring manifestation of intensified commercial pressures: the growth of “newsroom metrics” that measure and gauge reader engagement with digital news content. By fetishizing these audience analytics, journalists are driven to optimize their content for clicks, ultimately in ways that deteriorate their own working conditions.

Through careful, painstaking ethnographic research with the *New York Times*, *Gawker* (the pre-Peter-Thiel-destroyed [version](#)), and the audience analytics firm Chartbeat, Petre lays bare how such accelerating pressures are restructuring newsrooms and warping journalistic labor in profoundly troubling ways. She traces how the logic driving newsroom metrics aims to maximize profits by extracting greater productivity from news workers and greater commercial value from the content they produce.

News outlets increasingly rely on these metrics to provide incessant feedback about their content’s online performance. *Gawker* even kept in full view a wall-mounted, large-screen data dashboard — sometimes referred to as the “[big board](#)” — that was essentially a scoreboard displaying the traffic metrics of specific stories. Petre notes that Chartbeat’s specialty was to go beyond simple page views to calculate engagement metrics of time spent with the content and whether the article was shared. By compulsively following real-time analytics flashing across their screens — and reinforced by various rewards — many journalists develop a perverse obsession with such metrics. This growing fixation, according to Petre, is “reshaping the journalistic labor process.”

Petre observes that audience metrics are part of an emergent set of managerial strategies to discipline news work. This new kind of Taylorism is gradually creeping into so-called creative and knowledge work — areas of expertise that typically enjoy more autonomy than industrial labor. While such professional expectations were perhaps always misguided (cultural workers are, after all, still workers and still exploited by capitalism), journalists’ sense of personal agency and independence is particularly acute, and therefore especially affected by these changing work regimes.

By foregrounding journalism as a form of labor, a framework often ignored within the subfield of journalism studies, Petre gains purchase on interrogating key power relationships within the broader news industry. She notes that news metrics serve as a “form of labor discipline that shapes both the organization and lived experience of journalistic work under capitalism.” Drawing from Harry Braverman’s classic work showing how Taylorism “deskills” workers as a means of managerial control, Petre also integrates Michael Burawoy’s contributions to this critique to underscore how this regime requires workers to become “willing participants in the intensification of their own exploitation.”

For this managerial strategy to succeed, then, workers must maintain some agency throughout the process. This arrangement is rendered more palatable for journalists by the gamelike characteristics of the analytics dashboards, which have an addictive quality as media workers constantly try to win what Petre calls “The Traffic Game.” Petre argues that this habit-forming user interface with real-time newsroom metrics serves as a “regime of managerial surveillance.”

Having spent many weeks studying their daily activities “in situ,” Petre notes that Chartbeat’s strategy paid off handsomely, with journalists obsessing over ways to increase traffic numbers for their stories, pushing themselves to work ever harder, serving managerial interests more than their own despite the absence of direct coercion. Recalling Dean Starkman’s observations about the “[hamsterization](#) of journalism” from a decade ago, Petre reveals how struggling news organizations force journalists to work more for less under increasingly casualized and precarious conditions.

Petre’s analysis implicitly draws attention to the not-so-hidden eight-hundred-pound gorilla in the room: the monstrosity that is Facebook (a subject to which the book could perhaps have devoted more attention). Given the platform’s gatekeeping position as the primary portal to a massive global readership, reporters internalize an almost-instinctual awareness as to what types of content capture attention and perform well on the Facebook news feed. Such dynamics incentivize journalists — many of whom face intense job insecurity — to craft their reporting according to clickbait criteria that emphasize controversy, conflict, sensationalism, and anything that prompts people to engage with stories, thereby generating more advertising revenue.

Critics have long argued that metrics-driven journalism privileges fluff over high-quality news, while conditioning journalists to treat audiences as apolitical consumers and entertainment seekers rather than engaged participants within a democratic polity. By conflating consumer choice with democratic needs, these market-based values reduce audience engagement to a commercial transaction and devalue other less easily measured concerns, such as how well the press serves democracy.

Much to her credit, Petre often returns to such normative concerns, even as she provides thick description of how journalists negotiate these dynamics. A fundamental meta-question that she poses, along with several others midway through the book, that could serve as the overarching query is: “Can the profit imperatives of commercial news production coexist with the profession’s civic mandate?” The evidence featured in this book and elsewhere suggests that these aims are increasingly incompatible.

Early boosters suggested that metrics enabled journalists to be more responsive to their audiences’ desires, thereby democratizing the news. Overall, however, the metrification of news labor is yet one more blow to the dignity and quality of life for news workers, and increasingly other creative and knowledge-work sectors as well.

While Petre clearly shows news metrics’ many harms — and how they can be stressful and demoralizing for journalists — she also argues they can be empowering, defying an overly simplistic narrative of managerial exploitation. In her nuanced attention to “interpretive ambiguity,” Petre adopts what she sees as a dialectical relationship between managerial control and worker autonomy, where “journalists and analytics tools engage in the mutual shaping of each other.”

Petre also shows how journalists strive to establish ethical boundaries between “clean” and “dirty” uses of data, and they have some leeway in how they make sense of the traffic data relentlessly fed back to them. Citing Erik Olin Wright’s “contradictory locations within class relations,” she nods to editors’ divided loyalties in managing the use of newsroom metrics, sometimes siding with workers and other times management. And she notes significant differences between the *New York Times* strategy of subordinating the role of analytics in the editorial process compared to Gawker’s metrics-driven managerial strategy.

A counterintuitive potential benefit to metrics that Petre teases out is that they “may also *inadvertently* (her emphasis) cultivate a sense of shared grievance, collective identification, and class consciousness among knowledge workers.” It is notable that, in 2015, Gawker Media became the first major digital media outlet to unionize when their editorial employees voted overwhelmingly to form a union with the Writers Guild of America, East (WGAE), helping kick off an ongoing series of newsroom labor victories over the past six years.

In her conclusion, Petre highlights this glimmer of hope on the labor front within an otherwise dismal landscape. She points to the growing unionization efforts within traditional and new digital newsrooms as evidence of an increased sense of shared struggle and solidarity among news workers, which is necessary to counteract workplace abuses and the predations of capitalism. In the final analysis, Petre argues, metrics remind journalists that they are workers regardless of how “creative, prestigious, and autonomous [their work] may seem, and however passionately they may feel about it.”

Petre’s book is an antidote to the exuberance about the grand affordances of data-driven journalism that characterized so much writing and thinking in the 2010s. It brings into focus yet another startling example of how commercialism debases every facet of our news and information systems. But like other more visible problems — from the loss of jobs to the proliferation of mis- or disinformation to the Foxification of our news media — journalists’ worsening labor conditions are epiphenomenal of deeper institutional corruption.

Petre offers what’s essentially a meso-level analysis of workplace power relationships, centered between a macro-level political-economic critique of corporate ownership structures and capitalist ideology in the media industry, and a more micro-level view of journalistic routines and values. She deftly connects these layers while noting that the phenomena she studies are both symptoms and symbols of larger structural shifts, namely those involved in the unimpeded ascent of neoliberalism.

Petre’s invaluable research is another contribution to a growing body of research critiquing profit-driven journalism, which provides the necessary context for imagining systemic alternatives to failing commercial media models. To build on this intellectual foundation, we must begin envisioning and endeavoring toward a system that empowers news workers by giving them ownership and control over their newsrooms.

Leftist critics have been quick to indict corporate media, but less adept at articulating a new kind of media system, one that’s truly democratized under public ownership. This disconnect is surprising, given how the Left historically has seen the press as a crucial terrain for struggle. Social movements have long relied on various types of journalism, even within mainstream corporate media, to advance progressive causes. Reliable journalism and a functional news media system are vital components of any effort for progressive social change, from fighting fascism to halting climate change.

In short, we ignore news media’s death-by-metrics at our peril. The unholy union between capitalism and journalism is finally fraying beneath the weight of its many contradictions, and the industry’s worsening labor conditions are part of this broader reckoning. Petre’s book reveals the scope of the problem, while also encouraging us to view commercial journalism’s crisis as an opportunity to create something entirely different.

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Featured image: The Gawker "big board," a scoreboard displaying the traffic metrics of the publication's stories. ([Scott Beale / Laughing Squid](#) via Flickr)

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