Book Review: Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms by Angèle Christin

In **Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms***,* **Angèle Christin** *explores how the introduction of metrics and algorithms has affected journalists' work practices and professional identities. Showing how metrics can work to exacerbate existing divergences and gaps between and within organisations, this book will appeal to those interested in social studies of technology, the sociology of work and critical data studies, writes* **Lucas Stiglich***.*

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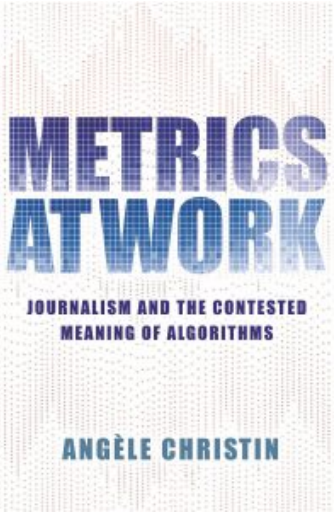
***Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms*. Angèle Christin. Princeton University Press, 2020.**



Algorithmically mediated metrics increasingly permeate all aspects of social life. Likes, views and follower numbers are indicators that we are used to seeing when we look at our phones, laptops or tablets. This is also true in the workplace. From drivers who are constantly subject to customer ratings, to logistics workers who need to pay attention to pick-up and drop-off times, to office managers who can track the behaviour and performance of remote workers through Microsoft Workplace Analytics, metrics and algorithms play a central role in organising work.

In *Metrics at Work*, Angèle Christin looks at how the introduction of metrics in the workplace interacts with professional fields, identities and work practices. She does so by looking at the role of metrics in newsrooms through a comparative ethnography conducted over five years in two online media organisations, one in the US, which is called 'The Notebook' by the author, and one in France, nicknamed 'LaPlace'.

In academic literature, metrics and algorithms at work have been studied both from a critical perspective as tools for surveillance and control and from a more optimistic perspective as drivers of economic efficiency. Christin argues that favourable accounts and critical views on metrics and algorithms tend to err on being too deterministic. By looking at them as primarily technical features and taking their efficacy and power for granted, these views overlook the fact that the work metrics do is always contingent on institutional, political and cultural factors. In the book, she proposes to move away from deterministic accounts of metrics at work by conceptualising them as complex symbolic and cultural resources. Under this view, metrics always stand for something larger than themselves, and their meaning can be contested and mobilised to different ends and perform varied functions under different contexts.

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Metrics at Work addresses this by looking at how the capacity to track and measure what readers do online has transformed the relationship between mass media outlets and their audiences. Traditionally, mass media was thought of as an industry where the public capacity to speak back was limited. However, over the past twenty years, journalists and editors have had access to more information on how their audiences relate to their work than ever before. Some argue that this has led newsrooms into a reckless competition for clicks, in which journalistic values and editorial criteria are downplayed in favour of commercial imperatives. Christin instead argues that although the chase for clicks is a real phenomenon, the role of metrics in newsrooms is more nuanced and exists in constant tension between different imperatives. These, in turn, are related to the cultural and institutional contexts of each newsroom.

The first two chapters of the book set the context for the argument by describing the trajectory of the national journalistic fields of the US and France up until the emergence of the commercial internet in the 1990s. During the first half of the twentieth century, journalists in the US and France developed different approaches to their relationships with publics, which were shaped by diverging economic and regulatory contexts within each national journalistic field.

However, in the 1980s and 1990s, some global trends indicated a tendency towards convergence. First, through a global process of financialisation and marketisation of media organisations in the 1980s, and then via the adoption of the internet and the utopian ideals of a networked public sphere associated with it. However, Christin's work shows how, even in the face of apparent technological and political-economic convergence, there have been persistent points of divergence in terms of how different organisations relate to and make use of new technologies.

This argument is developed in the following three chapters by focusing on how analytics are used and interpreted differently in both outlets, how these usages and interpretations relate to different institutional contexts and how they have different impacts on editorial production and compensation. While the two newsrooms studied use the same analytics software set to learn about their readers, journalists and editors across both newsrooms attach different meanings to their outputs.

At 'The Notebook', metrics were used mainly by editors and managers to measure commercial success and therefore kept at a distance by journalists who considered those goals outside of the scope of their role. In contrast, in the French newsroom, journalists had an ambivalent relation to metrics, which they saw both as a reflection of the relevance of their work for the public and as indicators of market pressures that threatened the quality of their work. By looking at how both journalists and editors rationalise their use of metrics, Christin draws attention to the existing tension between 'click-based and 'editorial' evaluations of journalistic work.

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Far from offering a deterministic approach to algorithms and metrics in the workplace, Christin shows that different cultural, professional and institutional contexts can produce different rationalisations and uses of these resources.

Different interpretations and effects of metrics are related to the historical trajectories of the journalistic field in the US and France, but also to the organisational dynamics in each newsroom. At 'The Notebook' the roles and hierarchies of journalists, editors and managers were mostly delimited, authority was centralised, and the rules by which they had to play were clear. At 'LaPlace', the hierarchy was instead diffuse, the roles were less compartmentalised and every journalist was more or less in charge of figuring out what constituted a good performance. In that sense, while the US newsroom relied on a bureaucratic form of power, characterised by strong boundaries, clear responsibilities and defined rules, the French newsroom developed a form of disciplinary power, in which workers would constantly try to find ways to self-evaluate and regulate their performance.

However, the relation to metrics is not uniform within each newsroom. The position of journalists within newsroom hierarchies and labour regimes is also related to how they make sense of metrics. Journalists working in sections considered less 'serious' and journalists under non-standard work relations needed to constantly rely on metrics to prove the worth of their work. Conversely, journalists in more 'prestigious' sections and those with a more stable position within the organisation were more likely to disguise metrics as irrelevant commercial indicators and evaluate their own work only in terms of its editorial quality.

While most of the contemporary literature studying the use of data technologies in the workplace looks at how they are used for surveillance or to automate management tasks, Christin's study focuses on the symbolic dimension of these technologies and how the work they do is contingent on the cultural, institutional and organisational contexts in which they are deployed. In an age of increasing technological and political-economic convergence, the contribution of *Metrics at Work* lies in surfacing the diverging cultural dimensions of metrics. Far from offering a deterministic approach to algorithms and metrics in the workplace, Christin shows that different cultural, professional and institutional contexts can produce different rationalisations and uses of these resources. Thus, the book sheds light on how metrics, far from being an equalising force, can work to exacerbate existing divergences and gaps between and within organisations.

Metrics at Work is relevant to people interested in studying the production of news and how it is being transformed by new technologies. However, its contributions go beyond the field of journalism studies, as it puts forward a novel approach to look at how technologies are shaped by and shape organisational dynamics, power relations and professional identities. In that sense, *Metrics at Work* may also appeal to those interested in social studies of technology, the sociology of work and the emergent field of critical data studies.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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