

Web Production, News Judgment, and Emerging Categories of Online Newswork in Metropolitan Journalism

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Abstract

This paper documents a new form of news work that has emerged in online newsrooms (what I call web production) as well as the conflicting set of variables that are turning the news judgments of these workers towards a greater and greater focus on quantitative metrics of audience behavior. Emphasizing that web production is a form of newswork that transcends institutional – deinstitutional boundaries, I define the work as the aggregation, prioritization, inter-linking, and bundling of web content. Web production is particularly common in journalistic networks where pieces of content are composed and submitted by producers at the ends of the news network. The news judgments of these web producers stand in marked contrast from the judgments described by Herbert Gans and other media sociologists from the “golden age” of newsroom ethnography, and can be seen as centering around a new vision of the audience amongst online journalists. I documented at three major trends documenting a dramatically different relationship between digital journalists – particularly web producers-- and their online readership. There has rhetorical shift within the news industry towards the notion of the “active, creative audience,” an increased prevalence of technologies that allowed for the quantitative measurement of audience to an untold degree, and management strategies that emphasized the widespread diffusion of audience metrics. These developments have culminated in shifting patterns of news judgment amongst online web producers and other digital newsworkers. In short, the traditional journalistic values of autonomy and professional cultures of “writing for other journalists” are being overtaken by a focus on raw audience data and what I call a “culture of the click.” The paper argues that further research is needed to determine (1) the degree to which an organizational culture is emerging within online newsrooms to counteract or soften this click mentality, and (2), the exact relationship between technological, organizational, economic, and cultural factors in the development of this new news judgment.

Introduction

Over the past half decade, research into online journalism and the changing conditions of newswork has moved from the speculative and prescriptive to the empirical and critical². Indeed, we may be at the opening stages of a wave of news research that rivals, or even surpasses, the so-called “golden age” of newsroom sociology in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s³. The only problem, of course, is that our object of analysis— journalism-- is changing faster than scholarship can keep up. This paper is part of a larger, multi-year research project analyzing an industry in transition through a combination of social network analysis, ethnographic research, and so-called “Actor-Network” perspectives on technology and organizational change⁴. In it, I

² Domingo, “Interactivity in the Daily Routines of Online Newsrooms: Dealing with an Uncomfortable Myth.”

³ Zelizer, *Taking Journalism Seriously: News and the Academy*

⁴ Anderson, *Unbundling the News: Work, Authority, and the Unraveling of Metropolitan Journalism*

seek to cut through the massive amount of speculation on the future of the U.S. news industry with a deceptively simple question: how are online technologies, particularly those technologies that allow reporters, editors, and newsroom executives to quantify knowledge of their audience through the monitoring of reader behavior and traffic on their news websites, challenging longstanding journalistic conventions about “what counts” as news? News judgment was a unique topic of interest for the newsroom sociologists of the late 70’s (particularly Gans), and it would seem to be an opportune time to return to these questions in light of new, often overlooked, technologies. Approaching question in the right manner might also shed light on related issues like the relationship between technology and news production, as well as the shifting conditions of newswork and broader changes in metropolitan news ecologies.

Recent Literature on Newswork

This study can be categorized as part of a broader, empirically oriented wave of scholarship focusing on the changing conditions of newswork. This literature, much of it fairly recent, can be divided into two broad streams, each with their own internal divisions and areas of focus. One stream analyzes practices of cultural and rhetorical boundary maintenance amongst traditional journalists and their quasi-professional counterparts, while a second stream examines the daily work practices of reporters, bloggers, and what I call “journalistic hybrids.” Within the first stream-- focusing on boundary rhetoric and “occupational self-conception”-- some studies analyze how digital journalists envision their work roles⁵. Others examine the opinions journalists have about their non-professional counterparts, including bloggers,⁶ as well as the way in which non-professional groups have been framed by the traditional media.⁷ A final subset of research,

⁵ Deuze and Dimoudi, “Online Journalists in the Netherlands: Towards a Profile of a New Profession”; Cassidy, “Online News Credibility: An Examination of the Perceptions of Newspaper Journalists.”

⁶ Roth, “How Journalists See the Blogosphere.”

⁷ Himmelboim, “Just a Guy in Pajamas? Framing the Blogs: Emergence of the Blogosphere in Mainstream US Newspaper Coverage (1999-2005) .”

particularly the 2006 Pew Internet and American Life survey of the “internet’s new storytellers,” has examined how bloggers think about themselves.⁸

A second major stream of the newswork literature shifts the focus from rhetoric and self-conception to the actual daily work practices of reporters, bloggers, and citizen journalists. There are subsets within this second stream, as well: the first, in Boczkowski’s words, examines “the production, products, and consumption of online news by focusing *on the relationships between online and traditional journalism*, which has enabled them to place the issues under examination into larger journalistic dynamics.”⁹ A second set of studies, rather than comparing on- and offline newswork, specifically analyzes non-traditional journalistic practices (such as the actual day-to-day activities of bloggers and citizen journalists)¹⁰. A third subset of scholarship distinguishes less between traditional and amateur reporters, and instead emphasizes the hybridity of new media roles. Singer¹¹ and Robinson’s¹² research on political “j-bloggers” – journalists who adopt the traditional medium, culture, or work practices of the amateur bloggers—points to this overlap, as does Hermida and Thurman’s¹³ analysis of the BBC management’s struggle to incorporate user generated content into its web articles. As Robinson emphasizes, with regard to her description of the j-blog, the news production universe is far more complex and fragmented than the traditional division between amateur and professional would imply.

Although my overall research project generally followed the lead of news theorists who argue for a focus on journalistic hybridity, complexity, and diffuse boundaries, this particular paper-- with its emphasis on technological change amongst journalistic professionals-- returns to the relative stability of the institutional newsroom. It emphasizes both the work and the values of professional journalism, and looks at how the increased use of web metrics are changing those values. That said, I want to emphasize that the category of journalistic worker described in the

⁸ Lenhart and Fox, “Bloggers: A Portrait of the Internet’s New Storytellers.”

⁹ Boczkowski, “When More Media Equals Less News: Patterns of Content Homogenization in Argentina’s Leading Print and Online Newspapers.”

¹⁰ Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht, “Blogging as Social Activity, or, Would You let 900 Million People Read Your Diary?”; Herring et al., “A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Weblogs: 2003-2004”; Reese et al., “Mapping the Blogosphere: Professional and Citizen-Based Media in the Global News Arena”; The Project For Excellence in Journalism, “The State of the News Media 2008.”

¹¹ Singer, “The Political J-blogger: ‘Normalizing’ a New Media Form to Fit Old Norms and Practices.”

¹² Robinson, “The Mission of the J-blog: Recapturing Journalistic Authority Online.”

¹³ Hermida and Thurman, “Comments Please: How the British News Media is Struggling With User-Generated Content.”

pages that follow—the news “web producer”—should not be thought of as simply a new category of news professional. Web production can—and is—be done by editors at online news websites, by activist volunteers, by RSS aggregated bloggers, or by community diarists—basically, by anyone whose digital news project involves gathering, aggregating, prioritizing, and displaying content produced by anyone but themselves. (Which newswriters would not be included under this definition? Traditional bloggers, for one; traditional reporters, for another). For the purposes of this paper, then, we should consider “web production” as an emerging category of newswriting, occupying a space within the pantheon of journalistic labor alongside more traditional newswriting like reporting and editing, and more emergent newswriting like blogging.

Web Production and Online Newswriting

To compile the ethnographic data used in this paper I undertook a period newsroom-based fieldwork in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with observations completed primarily between May and August 2008. I spent time in the newsrooms of the *Philadelphia Daily News* (the city tabloid) and *Philadelphia Inquirer* (a broadsheet), as well as in what was jokingly known as the “not-quite newsroom” of Philly.com, a stand-alone website aggregating content from both papers. All three papers are owned by the same local company, Philadelphia Media Holdings (PMH)¹⁴. All in all, I completed more than 300 hours of observation at these three newsrooms, and also conducted more than 60 semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, activists, bloggers, and media executives to gain insight into old and new forms of journalistic work at both traditional and non-traditional media outlets. In general, I followed a methodological approach known as grounded theory— a research process that moves from limited theorizing to the collection of data to theorizing once again. My primary goal during this period of observation was to classify the relevant types of newswriting emerging in the new economy of online journalism. I did not assume the existence of any particular category of newswriter before I began my fieldwork; although I

¹⁴ In the fall of 2009, Philadelphia Media Holdings filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. While this development obviously plays a major role in my overall research project, I do not discuss its implications here.

expected that I would encounter traditional reporters and editors during my travels, my primary goal was to let these occupational types emerge directly from my observations. To a degree, I adopted a posture of what sociologist Bruno Latour has called “deliberate myopia”¹⁵ in an attempt to not prejudge the changes in newswork I might encounter.

Philly.com, the website aggregating and repackaging the content of both the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News*, was the primary organizational locale in which I observed the work of web production during my four months in Philadelphia. It is important to note that, under the complex organizational infrastructure of Philadelphia Media Holdings, Philly.com is its own independent institution; it has its own separate building-- located on the 35th floor of a non-descript office building at Market Street, and 16th Street in Philadelphia-- management, work processes, and culture. Surprisingly, the web production team took up only a fraction of the space inside the Philly.com offices— both in terms of space allocated and number of personnel the production team was far outnumbered by the marketing and advertising departments. Like the newsrooms I visited, lower-level employee desks occupied the central space of the main room, with executive offices ringing the outside walls. Although I imagined that the office environment would be filled with fun and games, perhaps somewhat reminiscent of the so-called “new economy” workspaces I had read so much about. It was instead a surprisingly quiet place, especially in contrast to the hustle and bustle of the newspaper newsroom. “This isn’t a newsroom,” I was told more than once by members of the Philly.com staff.

What exactly did newswriters at Philly.com do, and how did I come to classify their work as a distinct category of “web production”? When I began my fieldwork at Philly.com, the work day lasted from 5:30am until 11:00 at night; recent staff additions, however, were designed to allow the site to operate 23 hours a day, a process which was completed by mid-Fall of 2009. A rotating team of web producers worked a total of four shifts, each lasting 8 hours. Every day during every shift, one staff member was in charge of the homepage (the front page), while other members of the production team were in charge of a different section of the site, called a “channel.” One producer managed the entertainment page (“channel”), for instance, while a

¹⁵ Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*

second managed the “sports channel.” The day began with a 5:30 meeting between the executive website producer and the early morning staff. The meeting attempted to outline how the site would unfold over the course of the day, assuming that no major news events occurred (which was rarely the case). A second, larger meeting occurred at 11 am, a meeting that I was jokingly told was a “not quite news meeting.”¹⁶ During the not-quite news meeting, the production staff would review the stories already posted online, discuss how much web traffic they had generated, review emails from the *Inquirer* (and occasionally the *Daily News*) outlining the story budget for the day, once again trying to map the days news out as much as possible. The *Inquirer*’s online team is short staffed today, a typical conversation would begin, and a lot of her people are off. They’ve got one dead, one critical in an Atlantic City shooting, the conversation continued, and we think they’re going to be posting that news in a couple of hours. We could feature it in the “biggie” spot once they file it, another producer replied. The staff would also review the Philly.com production decisions already made before the meeting. We started the day with some coverage of the gymnastics qualifying competition, one producer began, but I recently moved up the *Daily News* cover story. “The teacher story wasn’t doing that great, so we swapped it out for a “carnal knowledge” feature,” the producer concluded. “I’m open to suggestions for a swap,” the executive producer replied. “What about moving ‘carnal knowledge’ up further, for lunchtime?”

A brief word about the terms used in the meeting detailed above might help readers understand what, exactly it was that Philly.com web producers did every day. “Trio,” “spotlight,” and “biggie” referred to the main content containers on the recently redesigned Philly.com. Trios were the somewhat more static, produced pieces at the bottom end of the top half of the site; often, trio stories contained links to web video and usually fell within a certain range of story types: sports, business, movies on Friday, and a “travel trio” on Sunday. Spotlight referred to the next level of story on the top half of the website, and consisted of stories that graphically fell between the trio section, below them, and the biggie section, above them. The biggie, as the name implies, referred to the dominant story on the top half of the website, usually a story with a collection of related links and a large picture. “Swap” referred to the process by which one story

¹⁶ fieldwork, 6/23/2008

was replaced with a different story on the site. Sometimes, an entirely new story would be added to the page, while sometimes a story already on the page would be “promoted,” as in the above comment “I’m open to suggestions for a swap. What about *moving ‘carnal knowledge up further, for lunchtime?’*” “Build out” referred to the manner in which an individual story was “enhanced” with graphics and, in particular, extra links, once it ascended to the biggie position.

At Philly.com specifically, the primary role of the web producer was to decide where a news story (usually written by a reporter at the *Inquirer* or the *Daily News*) belonged on the Philly.com website. This was an issue of news judgment: is a piece of news worthy of being a “biggie,” or should it be downgraded one notch and be a “spotlight,” or should it neither? What were some of the mechanical work tasks that realize this role? The process can be summarized as follows: an editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or *Philadelphia Daily News* online desk tags a new story “biggie breaking news,” presses ctrl-alt-a to submit the story through its Content Management System (CMS) and usually informs the Philly.com offices by email that the story has been submitted. Website producers, then, enter an internal page on the Philly.com content management system that contains a numbered list of stories. Story number one is mapped onto the “biggie” spot, while stories 2 and 3 map onto the “spotlight.” New stories from the newspapers tagged “biggie breaking news” automatically go in slot four. Producers, then, control access to slots one, two, and three. To move something from the top breaking news “headline slot” (position four) to the biggie slot, a producer would manually change the story position-to-position one, then add the necessary art and related links, and then update the site. Producers at Philly.com rewrite what they see to be web-unfriendly leads and headlines, procure art, and decide on ways to beef up stories with additional links. To move into the trio, the spotlight, or the biggie website slots, a story needs art, first and foremost, as well as an additional piece of “user-generated content” (often a comment box, or a poll). A story also almost certainly needs a collection of related links if it was going to ascend to the biggie position.

In a highly schematic fashion, then, web producers might be generally defined as:

aggregators, hierarchizers, inter-linkers, bundlers, and illustrators of web content. Web production is particularly common in journalistic networks where pieces of content are composed and submitted by producers at the ends of the news network. In many cases, these end-network producers are not formal members of the news institution doing the content-aggregation, and operate instead as deinstitutionalized news workers. The primary role of a web producer is this to coordinate amongst a series of quasi-institutionalized content producers. The primary tasks of the web producers are thus to build links between independently produced news stories and to rank these bundled news stories according to a rapidly changing sense of its importance, popularity, and newsworthiness.

Such a definition could obviously apply to workers at news websites other than Philly.com; it could also apply to more deinstitutionalized workers at aggregative websites-- online news pages, activist journals, RSS aggregated blogs, or by community diaries. During my broadly based Philadelphia fieldwork, I observed this form of newswork in all of these places. In the discussion of news judgment that follows, however, I am confining my analysis to newswork at more traditional news websites.

Philly.com web producers are thus engaged in a constant, shifting process of “deciding what’s news” for the hundreds of thousands of daily visitors to the Philly.com website. They obviously do not make this judgment about what constitutes news insofar as they assign or even write stories, of course, but they do decide about what the most “important” local news story is through their repeated hierarchization and bundling disparate links. In a sense, they tear up and rebuild the digital “front page” of Philly.com several times *an hour*. The contours, texture, and factors contributing to this rapidly deployed news judgment, then, would seem to warrant closer scrutiny. It is to a more in-depth discussion of online news judgment that I now turn. The following section will demonstrate that a key factor shaping the news judgment of Philly.com web producers is a new relationship with the news audience, a relationship based on an increased sensitivity to audience wishes that is both rhetorical and, even more importantly, quantifiable through new online measurement tools. I begin with an overview of the (surprisingly thin) literature on visions of the audience and journalistic news judgment before moving on to a discussion of what the current data might be telling us.

“We Are Not Old Style Journalism”: Web Production, User Feedback and News Judgment

For three decades, the conventional academic wisdom regarding the relationship between journalists and their audiences has been summed up in Herbert Gans' landmark study *Deciding What's News*.¹⁷ Usefully distinguishing between “qualitative” (letters to the editor and to individual journalists) and “quantitative” (audience research studies) forms of feedback, Gans, in a conclusion echoed by several generations of newsroom sociologists argues:

I began this study with the assumption that journalists, as commercial employees, take the audience directly into account when selecting and producing news ... I was surprised to find, however, that they had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it. Although they had a vague image of the audience, they paid little attention to it; instead, they filmed and wrote for their superiors and themselves, assuming, as I suggested earlier, that what interested them would interest the audience.¹⁸

Gans argues that multiple factors play a role in journalists' relative disconnect from their audience— an inability to conceive of the needs of an audience numbering in the millions; a distrust of audience news judgment; and the division between the editorial and marketing departments (creating a situation in which business personnel and news editors create a buffer between journalists and their audience). Less explicitly discussed by Gans, but also a factor in the traditional audience-newsroom separation, was the industry business model for much of the 19th and 20th century. Rather than selling the news directly to readers, journalists sold their product to advertisers, giving the audience a real but indirect influence over news judgment. The key values in tension in Gans' study, in other words, were professional incentives versus commercial imperatives. Journalists, adds Gans, “are reluctant to accept any procedure which casts news doubt on their professional autonomy”¹⁹, and within the boundaries of his study, professional values remained strong. Nevertheless, “in the last analysis, news organizations are overseen by corporate executives who are paid to show a profit. News judgment is resistant to change, and journalists will fight hard to preserve their autonomy; but if corporate economic well

¹⁷ Gans, *Deciding What's News*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 232

being is threatened, executives may insist that their news organizations adapt.”²⁰ And even in the 1970’s, Gans notes, local news production was always more sensitive to commercial and audience pressures than national news.

Two recent studies have revisited this conventional wisdom about journalist-audience relationships; each one has found journalistic knowledge of audience’s habits and news preferences to be far more extensive than in the days of *Deciding What’s News*. As Outing noted in 2005, “newspaper Web sites ... have detailed traffic numbers at their disposal. Today’s news editors know for a fact if sports articles are the biggest reader draw, or if articles about local crimes consistently outdraw political news. They can know how particular stories fared, and track the popularity of news topics.”²¹ “Server logfile data,” MacGregor elaborates

is only one of the communication devices available to online journalists*but it is one of the few non-human, semi-automated ones. It does not require audience intervention because whether the audience realizes it or not, their activity is Logged ... The journalist participants reveal that prolific use of server logfile data (tracking data) has arisen and developed in almost all publishing houses and editorial organizations consulted ... In large media organizations, the journalists obtain the tracking data through a third party, from hired companies such as Omniture, which analyze data from server log files and make results available to the editorial department. It is often then accessed directly on newsroom computers. In some cases journalists report the information has passed through the marketing department.”²²

Indeed, newspaper marketing and advertising departments are often the instigators, or at least the primary beneficiaries, of this increased knowledge of audience behavior. In essence, online editors, web producers and journalists who contribute content to metric collecting websites can know what articles their readers peruse, at what time of day, for how long, how news consumers found the article, at what point in an article a reader navigated to another page, and more. Much if not all of this information is available in real time. I have heard (though I have yet to document) that the *Fort Myers News-Press* in Florida is using a newsroom ticker/board in order to document the popularity of different articles on their web site, with the ticker board showing the number of hits articles are currently receiving.

²⁰ Ibid. 247

²¹ Outing, “Sophisticated Web Stats Give Editors Better Idea of Reader Interests.”

²² MacGregor, “Tracking the Online Audience.”

During my own ethnographic fieldwork I saw a shifts in the patterns of news judgment described by Gans, shifts accompanied by a deeper, more intense relationship between journalists, their audience, and the metrics used by editors and executives to map the behavior of that audience. I documented at three major trends documenting a dramatically different relationship between digital journalists – particularly web producers-- and their online readership. First, I observed a rhetorical shift within the news industry towards the notion of the “active, creative audience”; second, I saw an increased prevalence of technologies that allowed for the quantitative measurement of audience to an untold degree; third, I observed management strategies that emphasized the widespread diffusion of audience metrics. These developments culminated in shifting patterns of news judgment amongst online web producers and other digital newswriters. In short, the traditional journalistic values of autonomy and professional cultures of “writing for other journalists” are being overtaken by a focus on raw audience data and what I call a “culture of the click.”

The “Active” Audience

The most obvious change in journalistic attitudes towards audiences can be seen in the daily rhetoric and practices of industry leaders. When discussing a recent redesign of the Philly.com website, digital consultants summed up the new attitude toward internet consumers prevalent in much of the marketing end of the news industry. “Philly.com should do what only the web can really do,” one consultant told me. “Brands across the board have shifted. You can’t push from the mountaintop anymore. There is no tree line. So unless you let your users have some kind intimacy with the brand, and maybe even some control, you’re going to fail. They have to play with it. It has to be ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’”²³ The web audience, in short, was an active one. Journalists could no longer assume an attitude of passivity on the part of their readers.

²³ interview, 5/30/2008

While I observed some disconnect between the public rhetoric of audience engagement and discussions about journalist-reader relationship behind closed doors, it would be a mistake to assume that changes in newsroom attitudes toward the audience were simply rhetorical devices. Indeed, a number of actions taken by Philly.com programmers with regard to reader comments shows that the website was trying to take the interactive nature of the world wide web seriously. While Gans discusses letters and phone calls as qualitative forms of audience feedback, the internet affords readers the ability to comment directly on almost everything they watch and read. The technical possibility of such audience feedback of course, does not mean that the ability to provide such feedback is inevitable or even widespread. Indeed, executives at Philly.com spoke with pride about the fact that “default comments were on all Philly.com articles” – meaning that readers had the ability to comment on any story, and this ability would have to be taken away by site administrators rather than granted. Journalists and news executives displayed a welter of contradictory attitudes towards the feedback presented by audience members. “Philadelphia is really full of a bunch of boorish jerks,” one journalist said out loud after reviewing a series of particularly nasty comments on one article. Philly.com interns, aided by an aggressive spam-filtering system (so aggressive that it censored comments discussing Iraqi “Shiites”, for instance) worked to keep articles clean, but were often unsure about the line between passion and abuse. Other journalists were curious about their readers: ““I’m interested in who is leaving comments,” a city hall reporter told me one morning²⁴. Still other journalists mostly ignored the commenters, dismissing them as unrepresentative of the bulk of their readership. “You have to understand, these are people that have nothing better to do than surf the internet at 11am,” one journalist confided to me in a conspiratorial whisper. “They’re losers.” Many other journalists, (and even some of those that tried to simultaneously dismiss reader feedback) were upset by rude or vulgar reader posts, feeling that such reader comments reflected poorly on themselves as journalists or the articles to which the comments were attached. The line between article and reader feedback, in other words, was not always clear to reporters.

²⁴ fieldwork, 6/19/2008

There were equally contradictory attitudes about the degree to which reporters and bloggers should bother to engage their readers in the comments sections of articles, though attitudes seemed to be shifting, over time, towards more audience engagement. In the early days of newspaper blogging, a popular writer told me, his online editor told him that a blogger is the voice of god, and you're lowering your status if you engage your readers. ' I was told that it would be bad if I spent my entire day Arguing with people in the comments section.' This blogger soon changed his mind. At this point, he concluded, the ability to get conversation going with commenters depended more on "how much time I have than anything else."²⁵

One Philly.com executive summed up the attitude towards reader comments at a joint meeting between Philly.com executives and newsroom staffers. First, Philadelphians love to comment, she began. Second, Philadelphians love to spew racist trash. Third, our filtering system is really strong— "we filter out "Bastardo" and "Shiite," she laughed. And finally, we don't know ahead of time what people want to talk about. "Conversations come in surprising places. [For instance] on a story about Blackrock Capital, which is seeking tax breaks to move to Philly. Who would have thought that a back and forth about tax breaks and subsidies would be a place where you'd get a really informative dialog on Philly.com?"

As one veteran news editor pointed out to me, journalistic attitudes towards reader comments weren't all that different than their earlier attitudes towards letter and phone calls. In an echo of Gans' findings, journalists were simultaneously curious about and dismissive of their audience; when faced with unpleasant or jarring reader feedback, they often argued that the readers leaving comments were an unrepresentative minority. Indeed, if reader comments had been the extent of audience impact on journalistic processes it would be safe to conclude that, at a deeper level, not much had really changed with regard to audience impact on news processes. But qualitative audience impact, in the form of comments and other "user generated content," was *not* the primary manner in which the audience was affecting news routines. Rather, *technological developments allowing for instantaneous audience metrics and newsroom management*

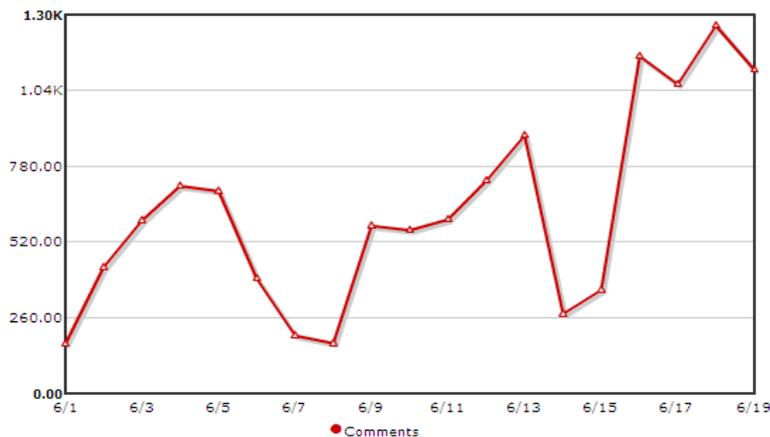
²⁵ interview,

strategies that emphasized the widespread diffusion of these metrics marked the primary axial shift in the journalist-audience relationship.

Web Metrics, Management Strategy, and News Judgment

We can get an initial sense of what I mean here by taking a second look at the impact of user comments. While public and internal discussions of Philly.com commenting partially concerned the quality of user dialog, they primarily revolved around the *number* of comments and the manner in which commenting affected website traffic overall. The following Power Point slide, which documented the impact of making comments “default on” on all articles, is fairly typical. In effect, much of the discussion about comments concerned their ability to generate website hits.

FIG. 1: NUMBER OF COMMENTS ON PHILLY.COM ARTICLES



One of the most interesting things about working at Philly.com, a company executive told reporters was that “you get constant feedback on your work ... and I don’t mean emails, I mean constant exposure to traffic.”²⁶ As MacGregor summarizes:

The journalist participants reveal that prolific use of server logfile data tracking data has arisen and developed in almost all publishing houses and editorial organizations

²⁶ fieldwork, 6/25/2008

consulted. A variety of uses, and degrees of use, are revealed, and journalists demonstrate an intelligent, sometimes critical interest, in the information provided. They make extensive interpretations.²⁷

MacGregor's overview of the adoption and use of website tracking data in newsrooms was almost entirely confirmed by my own ethnographic work. Philly.com and the affiliated Philadelphia newspapers utilized a system called Omniture to track their visitor data and, quite often, *make major editorial decisions based on website traffic numbers*. Once again, however, the simple existence of a technology did not mandate its use—my observations showed that the strategic use of web stats were part of a deliberate strategy for online newsroom management.

Knowledge of website traffic was widely available for journalists who wanted it. During my time at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I was approached by one online newsworker clutching Omniture website data in his hand. This reporter handed me a page of “click counts,” sorted by author name. “We’re probably headed toward a new model where reporters get paid by clicks,” the reporter said darkly, only half in jest. “People who are concerned with their careers know these things, but most people still aren’t concerned with stats, but I am.” The reporter then told me about a powerfully written, extensively researched *Philadelphia Inquirer* story about a local army company that “just bombed on the website, it just did terrible. You want to throw fear in to the hearts of journalism professionals? That’s a way.”

A producer at Philly.com echoed this sentiment:

Even when I first came here, we had a much cruder system [to measure traffic], but we had skilled programmers ... and we would get emails in the middle of the day which would be about which stories were doing well, and we would take them to the news meetings [of the papers] and I think they were a little shocked a lot of the time, because even then we knew that a lot more people clicked on the gossip story than clicked on your story, which you spent all this time investigating. that was maybe not something readers cared about as much., because you know, papers don't have that same way of following what it is people care about.

But in the old days, we thought different things were more important than they are. You know a lot of [story selection] used to go by editor's interests. And of course maybe we went more with the paper and what it's strong with also, as opposed to looking at traffic reports. And realizing exactly what people click on. And you know, I've always had this argument – because I did to work on the Knight-Ridder national news team-- I've always had this argument that just because people are not going to click on a story about Iraq doesn't mean that you shouldn't have a headline up there. Because some people just

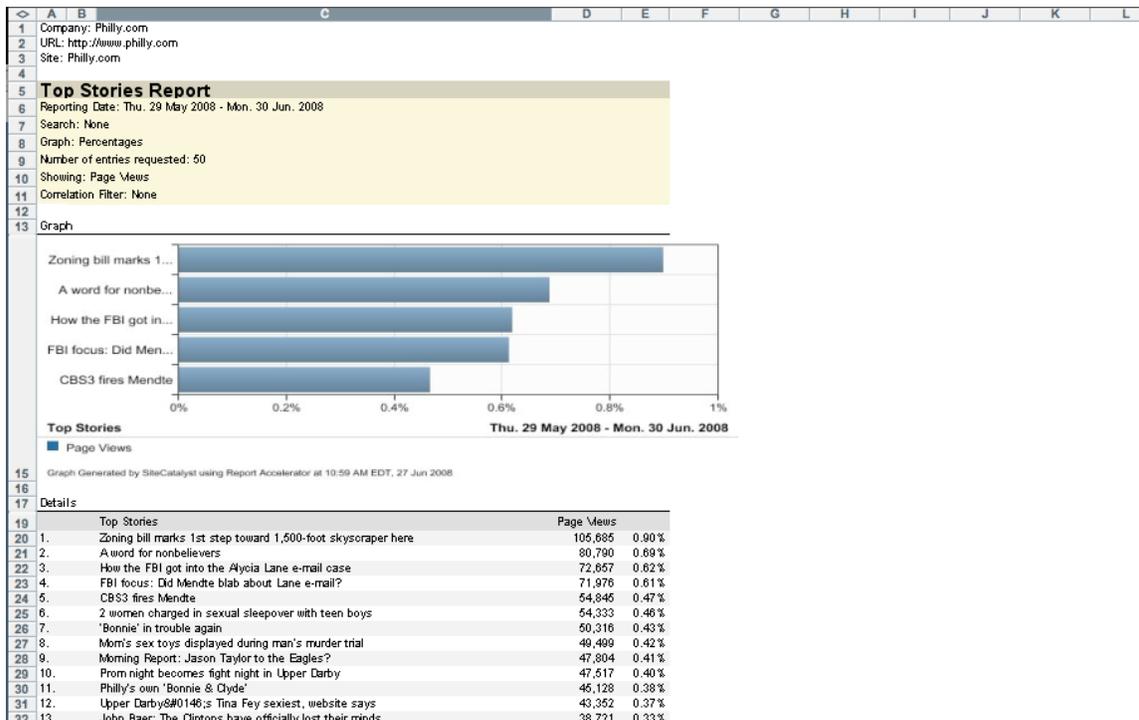
²⁷ Ibid.

want to read the headline. And it just makes you look bad if you're a big news site and you don't have the right news there. ... And I think we always knew that sports was big, and gossip was big, and big talker stories were big, but, when we saw the cold numbers ... I think that was kind of when a lot of people woke up.

"The bottom line is, we are not old style journalism," a Philly.com executive told me. But, that definition was no longer operative, he continued, telling me about an Philadelphia Inquirer story about a special eye virus that brought sight back to the blind. "It was an amazing story, or rather, it was an amazing whole package of stories. But it bombed. It got no traffic. And it was then that I realized we're in a new world."²⁸ "The data shows our sports page is really our second homepage," another website executive told me. Indeed, a June breakdown of traffic percentages for the year to date showed Philly.com accounting for 17.2% of all hits, followed by the Eagles Forum (2.9%), Philly.com/sports (2.4%), and the Philadelphia Inquirer homepage (2.3%)—and that was before the start of Eagles season and before the Phillies World Series win. As further evidence that a focus on metrics was part of a deliberate newsroom management strategy, the top Philly.com stories as of the end of May were collected and distributed to staffers as an Excel spreadsheet:

FIG 2: ONLINE WEB STATISTICS REPORT, PHILLY.COM

²⁸ interview, 6/26/2008



Website traffic numbers, no matter what the content of actual clicked articles, were invoked often at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and almost obsessively at Philly.com. We hit “35.8 Million in November,” went a typical presentation about the new website to the news staff, “37.9 Million in December, 38.8 Million in Jan, 42.1 Million in April, 39.1 Million in May, and 33.9 Million in June” (fieldwork, 6/25/2008). This is not good news on traffic, the presenter continued. “We’re in a summer slump—and we aggressively need to find way to end it. We will protect our growth in page views! Everybody here should be thinking what can I get to Philly.com now’ in terms of content. And what can I add to the story that’s good for the web. There should be an urgency around the idea of sending stuff to Philly.com.” There was a similar rhetoric about page views during staff meetings at Philly.com. “We’re trending low for the day,” went a typical summer meeting. “But, uniques were up for the day.” And so on. This would then be followed by a discussion amongst the group as to why numbers were down— perhaps it has to do with vacations in the summertime, one producer might suggest. “Either way, it can’t last.”²⁹

²⁹ fieldwork, 6/23/2008

Even outside official meetings, traffic patterns played a major role in the selection of stories for Philly.com. “I just pulled this story off the spotlight, it was underperforming, it only had 137 page views” was a common phrase to hear shouted across the Philly.com office. “Usually give a story at least an hour to prove itself,” one web producer told me “500 page views is pretty good, 1000 is great. It’s easier to compare story traffic in the morning when everything goes up at the same time. Then you can basically compare different articles with each other. The afternoon, when things are more erratic, it’s tougher to compare.”³⁰

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that web site traffic often appeared to be the *primary ingredient* in Philly.com news judgment. While MacGregor argues that “[although] data are therefore directly revising the way “news values” are implemented in the respondent sample, overall, social and organizational context rather than technology alone shape the way these online professionals react to their new tool,”³¹ my own ethnographic research demonstrates that Philly.com, at the time of my visit, lacked a strong organizational culture that would mitigate against the dominance of a website management strategy based on clicks. I probed this topic in three ways during my conversations with Philly.com web producers and newspaper journalists. “Is there an organizational culture that can mitigate the primacy of web statistics when it comes to choosing stories?” I first asked bluntly. Rephrasing my question somewhat during later interviews, I put forward the following hypothetical scenario: say that a tech staffer came up with a way to automate the Philly.com website so well trafficked stories were automatically placed in the biggie, spotlight, and trio slots. What would be left for a web producer to do?” Finally, I simply asked: what’s the perfect Philly.com story? “The adventures of Bonnie and Clyde [two young, attractive area college students charged with identity theft] were the perfect Philly.com story. A story that is going to get tons of hits, and is going to elicit a lot of comments.”³² “Is there a news culture at Philly.com yet?” a web producer said in response to one of my questions. “Let’s put it this way: if there was, the personnel has changed so much I think there probably isn’t anymore. Literally in the last couple of months, There’s four of us on the entire team who are not new, and the bosses

³⁰ interview, 6/30/2008

³¹ Ibid.

³² interview, 7/12/2008

are new.” “Occasionally we’ll buck the trend towards click thinking, if there’s a strong local news story or breaking news – we tend to do it more with breaking news—or if there’s good stuff in the paper,” another web producer said. “But, in general, moving away from click driven thinking is the exception.”

“We’re trying to be a real strong local news site that appeals to our audience and gets traffic,” he concluded:

You just sort of get used to knowing what kind of news gets clicked. A story about the Middle East, a national story— no. We’re trying to pick out strong local stories or strong state stories that we know will appeal to our readership. We’re a news site, but we don’t feel tied to the definition of news, as in breaking news. As far as the spotlight versus the biggie goes, it’s intuitive, but we just put about anything we think will get clicked up there at this point. You just have a gut feeling about it. Like for an article about Michelle Obama: your gut instinct is that it’s not going to get picked up, but if it’s getting clicked we’ll bump it up.³³

In sum, the sudden availability of news metrics was making journalists and editors more sensitive to the implications of what their audience was reading and why. Due, in part, to a deliberate management emphasis on the widespread diffusion of metric data, along with a fairly desperate need for greater traffic numbers that could boost online ad revenues, web producers at Philly.com were basing more and more of their news judgments on raw, quantitative data. It should be obvious from this summary that there exists no simple causal relationship between new technology (in this case, web-based user tracking data) and changes in news judgment. Indeed, we can tentatively conclude that web measurement techniques count for only one aspect of the shift in Philadelphia towards a more metrics-driven, deautonomized notion of what news is worthy of being prominently featured on Philly.com. Additional factors included the need for higher amounts of web-traffic and, along with that traffic, advertising revenue; a newsroom strategy that emphasized the use of web metrics as a staff management tool; and, finally, a rhetorical shift in journalists conception of the news audience as “active” rather than “passive” and “remote.” There were shifts newspaper economic systems, newsroom processes, and cultural understandings of news audiences. The emergence of a new technology-- online measurement systems was-- at

³³ interview, 6/24/2008

best, an affording factor rather than a causal one. The exact interplay of all these relationships in the movement toward a more quantitative conception of news judgment is a topic that might be pursued in future research on this important and overlooked issue.

Conclusion: Between Web Metrics and “Deciding What’s News”

During my time in Philadelphia, I was struck by the similarity of the business models of *Philadelphia Daily News* and Philly.com. Because the *Daily News* makes most of its sales off newspaper stands, it is highly dependent on its front page to “carry” the paper. It is at the whim of what could be seen as a primitive form a “click mentality.” Approaching the newsstand change in hand, the split second decision-- “to buy or not to buy”-- most resembles the image of the autonomous consumer imagined by the producers at Philly.com. Mitigating this rampant obedience to brute market pressure, however, was the self-image of the workers at the *Daily News*, a self image grounded in decades of serving as the “people’s paper” of the city of Philadelphia. During news meetings, I watched the “people’s paper” mentality intersect with cover stories that editors knew would sell. Often, editors would go with what sold, but just as often, they went with cover stories that we’re true to the conception they had of themselves. At this early stage, Philly.com lacked such a newsroom culture; or, at the very least, the exact dimensions of that culture had yet to be fully articulated.

“We’re not ashamed of the fact that one of the primary missions of our website is to build traffic,” a Philly.com executive told me during a follow up round of fieldwork in the winter of 2009. That said, this executive felt that there was an emerging news judgment at Philly.com that went *beyond* the culture of the click. “Three things go into web producer work,” this executive told me. “The news, what builds an audience, and what engages the community. Sometimes the three overlap. Sometimes they don’t. Some of this is snobbery ... And for a while, journalists didn’t have any idea who their audience was or what they wanted. Now, I can not only see what someone read, I can see how far they read, if they came or went to another article, if it drove them off the site.” During an organizational meeting in the late summer, a long-time Philadelphia

news editor with the *Daily News* mused aloud about what ingredients might constitute a “perfect” Philly.com news story in the much the same way he often wondered about what made for a “classic” tabloid cover page. During this conversation, it seemed obvious to me that reporters and editors alike were trying to uncover patterns of Philly.com news judgment that transcended the mere reactivity to audience metrics.

If and when such a news judgment—a judgment that differs from the kind particular journalistic autonomy exercised by most print and television reporters in the days of *Deciding What’s News*, but at the same time more nuanced than simply the rote following of audience metrics—were to emerge in Philadelphia, it would echo the conclusions of most of the research done on this topic to date. Both Outing and MacGregor argue that “editors’ judgment remains tantamount -- at least for now -- and that most online news editors are treating site statistics with caution.”³⁴

The editors and journalists agree the need for numbers. They realize that volume is essential to survival. But this sensitivity seems to enhance in an equal degree the counter response that site values must be preserved in well-articulated, often non-populist, editorial news or brand values. It is far too simple to suggest that journalism means an uncritical hunt for markets. Numbers need to attach to specific audience qualities, and this link between numbers and values is still seen as the true grail, the truly virtuous circle.³⁵

Based on my Philadelphia research, I have come to conclusions that are somewhat starker. Editors’ judgment and the “virtuous circle” between what the audience “says it wants” and “what it needs to know” are under increasing pressure from the weight of declining ad revenues and the mass of available quantitative data. Still, it seems foolish to imagine that journalists will ever be content to entirely sacrifice their professional news judgment. In order to tease out the nuances of this potentially emergent zone of newsroom culture—this middle ground between the culture of the click and editors continued sense of “what audiences need to know-- I see the need for further research. When making arguments about something as fundamental as “deciding what’s news” and the impact of quantifying technologies on news judgment, it will be useful to

³⁴ Outing, “Sophisticated Web Stats Give Editors Better Idea of Reader Interests.”

³⁵ MacGregor, “Tracking the Online Audience.”

have additional data. To that end, I am now collecting responses about audience engagement and web metrics with an online survey. I also plan to visit at least two other online newsrooms in the months ahead in order to better triangulate my extensive Philadelphia observations regarding news metrics, visions of the audience, and changes in news judgments. At least preliminarily, however, we should be cognizant of the degree to which technological, economic, and cultural factors are shaping the production of online news, and shaping them in ways that are often not immediately apparent amidst the dominant scholarly and professional dialogues about user-generated content” and the end of the newspaper industry. To the degree that online newsrooms, increasingly unmoored from their print counterparts, fail to cultivate a culture that can insulate them from “knowing exactly what the audience wants,” they will fall back on a news judgment process they imagine at least serves their fragile bottom line: the news culture of the click.

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