Tips for Moving the Needle:
How Newsroom Managers Can Design a Sensible and Useful Metrics Policy

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Nowadays, metrics are in nearly every newsroom. But ubiquity isn't the same as popularity: for many journalists, metrics seem confusing, overwhelming, distracting, or pointless. A thoughtful, tailored policy for using analytics in your newsroom can go a long way towards making sure metrics are actually useful and not insanity-inducing. Based on Petre's extensive research on the use of metrics in newsrooms and Keller's experience developing an impact-measuring tool, here are some tips for developing one:

1. **Consider the potential impact of your metrics policy not only on content, but also on newsroom culture.** Conversations about the ideal role of metrics in newsrooms often revolve around questions about predicted editorial effects – e.g., will looking at uniques help the newsroom to better serve its audience? Will looking at page views incentivize the production of clickbait? But it is just as important to think about the *managerial* effects of metrics. How are metrics likely to affect newsroom morale and employees' relationships to their work and to each other?

2. **It's okay to have multiple "metrics that matter," so long as expectations are clear.** There is increasing pressure on newsroom managers to simplify the complex analytics landscape by choosing a single "metric that matters" for their newsrooms. But this isn't always possible – or even desirable – in newsrooms that are trying to accomplish multiple goals at once (say, reaching a wide audience and holding public figures accountable). Rather than trying to shoehorn all your organizational goals into a single metric, newsrooms can evaluate performance on multiple measures – just make sure you're clear with employees about what those measures are and exactly what is expected of them.

3. **When setting traffic targets, focus on group goals – not individual ones.** Metrics that rank individual writers against their coworkers are demoralizing and demotivating; they can also discourage the type of teamwork that is increasingly necessary in newsrooms trying to do more with less. If you're setting traffic targets in your newsrooms, design collective goals that apply to particular sections, verticals, or other teams.

4. **Don't compensate writers based on traffic.** Paying writers based on the number of clicks (or uniques, shares, minutes-on-page, etc.) that their articles attract may be tempting, but generally speaking it's not a great idea. It causes employees considerable stress, discourages journalistic risk-taking, and can drown out other forms of performance evaluation.

5. **Devote more newsroom resources to article-tagging.** It may not be glamorous (okay, it's definitely not), but developing and maintaining a detailed tagging system for your articles is well worth the effort. It will allow your newsroom to

capture data that will be highly valuable in assessing audience and impact over time.

6. **When measuring impact, be willing to experiment with both qualitative and quantitative metrics.** Tracking qualitative measures of impact, such as when an influencer mentions your story or whether it prompts a Congressional hearing, can be labor-intensive, but it's highly worthwhile. (And, of course, tools like Newslynx are working to make it easier). Meanwhile, quantitative metrics are often vilified as encouraging the creation of clickbait, but they too can provide valuable insight into your newsroom's impact. The bottom line: both qualitative and quantitative metrics are important to understanding the post-publication life of a story.

7. **Choose your analytics tool with care…**When choosing an analytics service for your newsroom, consider the business model and values of the vendor. Metrics dashboards often present themselves as authoritative and dispassionate reflections of the empirical world; it can be easy to forget that analytics companies have their own business imperatives. Newsroom managers should consider which analytics company's values, branding strategy, and strategic objectives best align with their own goals.

8. **…Or make your own!** With the continuing maturation of open source analytics pipelines, it is now possible for news organizations to own their entire analytics stack and not have to rely on third party vendors for data. The next few years could see newsrooms access much more diverse offerings, providing faster analysis and greater detail, which is more relevant to journalism. That said, these pipelines are largely for data collection, so most newsrooms would need to design and implement their own custom interfaces to interpret this data for the average reporter and editor.