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GROWING THE AUDIENCE:
ARE NEWSROOM METRICS KILLING WATCHDOG REPORTING?

by

Paul D'Ambrosio

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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Abstract

This paper explores the story selection process of reporters in newsrooms that use online metrics to measure article performance. As most media companies pressure reporters to deliver bigger viewership numbers, the gatekeeping power has been placed mostly in the hands of reporters. The questions investigated are whether this pressure is affecting the traditional First Amendment watchdog role of journalists and whether government oversight stories are being cast aside in place of lighter fare that will attract a mass audience. The study used a mixed-method involving story tracking data from a large East Coast newsroom; a national survey of reporters; and in-depth interviews with journalists. This investigation found that many reporters are embracing watchdog stories and such stories are likely helping them grow their metrics numbers. Reporters are using readership metrics to fine-tune their hunt for stories to maximize watchdog content, and readers reward reporters with higher metrics for the content.

Keywords: Mixed method, watchdog, newsroom metrics, reporting, gatekeeping

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Introduction

In 2014, the Gannett Co. Inc., owner of more than 100 U.S. media outlets, including USA Today (Gannett Co. Inc., 2017), launched its self-directed newsroom initiative code-named Picasso¹ (Gannett Co. Inc., 2014). The mission was to disassemble the top-down, traditional pyramid-style management structure of newsrooms and enable reporters to become free agents. They were to use a series of newly designed internal web metrics to identify story sources, write content, build an audience and market themselves through social media and personal appearances to grow their following (Gannett Co Inc., 2014).

Gannett's codification of its metric goals was indicative of the rapid changes happening throughout the news media industry. Most, if not all, of the online media's efforts are focused on attracting readers to news websites and then measuring the readers' collective online actions with metrics tools (Pew Research Center, 2016).

As is natural with any change, the intense focus on metrics can give rise to unexpected consequences and conflicts, both internal and external. Were editors to cede all power and sit idly by while reporters pursued their metrics-driven agendas? Would traditional watchdog and First Amendment roles of the media give way to clickbait stories about squirrels on skateboards and celebrity gossip? Would niche, at-risk, low-income and minority-group audiences be ignored in the quest for the highest number of web clicks?

Such change raised the question of how the news paradigm would shift. The traditional agenda-setting role of the local media (think Perry White, Superman's Daily Planet editor,

¹ The name was adopted by the study committee after touring a Pablo Picasso exhibit at the National Museum of Art in Washington. The members were struck by the postmodern art that examined the world in an alternative way.

barking assignments to reporters) would move out of the office and into the public arena where external forces like social media and viral videos could influence story selection and coverage.

The move toward metrics-driven goals made business sense. If news media companies rely on page views to sell advertising, then the more eyeballs on a story would lead to more income for the company. And, with the need for fewer editors to direct content, a company could reduce overall costs as well. The goal at Gannett during the Picasso change, according to the *Tennessean* then-Executive Editor Stefanie Murray, was to have “self-sufficient reporters producing publication-ready copy” without editing oversight (Doctor, 2014).

However, were reporters motivated, trained and skilled to make the rapid change into a metrics-driven world? The quest for this study will be to understand the reporters’ mindsets in story selection and development. The study will seek to determine if First Amendment watchdog and investigative stories are in peril because of the dynamic shift away from topics-and-editor-driven stories and toward metrics-driven content.

Literature Review

In 1972, McCombs and Shaw proposed their agenda-setting theory that propounded the idea that mass media are effective, at least in the political arena, in telling people what issues to think about during a campaign. The story selection, placement and even the length, signaled to news consumers that certain issues were more important than others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Their research exposed the profound power the mass media have over other forms of communication and, by extension, the responsibility media outlets carried when it came to conveying accurate news reports.

Adding to the complexity of story selection and placement is the inherent gatekeeping factor, influenced by two confluent forces: human bias and company goals (Servan, 2015). White

(1950) found that newspaper “gatekeepers” were faced with a flood of information and had to not only make subjective decisions to narrow the flow, but had to keep in mind the needs of the reader, or the receiver, of the news. Breed (1955) took this idea further and theorized that while the corporate structure of a newspaper may impose editorial direction and intent, the producer of that message – the reporter – is primarily in control of the final product due to his or her selection of facts and writing slant. Thus, the filtering of the news for an audience places a powerful demand on mass media producers (Shoemaker P. J., 1991) and can profoundly shape a citizen’s view of the world (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). News media, multiple research has shown, has the power to shape community thoughts by focusing on certain topics – and ignoring others (Ghanem, 1997; Lopez-Escobar, Llamas, & McCombs, 1998; Wanta & Hu, 1993).

In the present-day newsroom, many mass media reporters commonly post to the web first rather than holding a story for the print edition a day later. Writing for the web imposes the pressure of posting the news as soon as feasible, while the print product allowed a 24-hour cycle to collect, verify, polish and write the final news story. Print stories offer no objective feedback for the reporter other than praise from an editor or an angry phone call from a stakeholder, sometimes days after the initial story hit the newsstands. Web stories, when measured by web metrics, however, offer instant feedback to the writer (Weblers, van Atteveldt, Kleinnijenhuis, Ruijgrok, & Schaper, 2016). In their survey of five national Dutch news media site, Weblers et al. (2016) found that “storylines of the most-viewed articles were more likely to receive attention in subsequent reporting, which indicates that audience clicks affect news selection” (p. 1037).

At the core of the web metrics model is an economic argument: Should the producer, or trustee of the news, determine the market and control what the market should see, or should the audience, or marketplace, set the standards (Schudson, 2003; Weblers et al., 2016)?

Gannett's switch to Picasso seemed to answer that question: market forces determine news direction. If reporters were being judged on their metrics, it stands to reason that the reporters would have to meet those goals or their future with the company would be in peril.

In their research, Weblers et al. (2016) found that storylines with the most clicks tended to receive the most attention for follow-up news reports. Their quantitative analysis found that "the rise of online audience metrics increases the influence of audience preferences on the work of journalists" (Weblers et al., p. 1049). In the pre-metrics newsroom of the 20th century, Scheufele (1999) described a feedback framing loop between the journalist and reader that is constantly adjusted. That loop can only be exacerbated today with the use of real-time metrics.

However, subsequent interviews with editors and reporters showed that both denied being influenced by web metrics, an indication that traditional journalists are internally conflicted – they feel they are maintaining their traditional gatekeeping role with journalistic standards but at the same time are being influenced by the market forces around them (Weblers et al., 2016).

If there is any thought that newsrooms in the Netherlands are different than those in the United States, other research has put that to rest. Anderson (2011) found that U.S. newsrooms face the same pressures and conflicts from metrics technology. Before metrics, the notion of a print audience was nebulous. A great mass of people would buy the paper in the morning, read an unknown part of it and make unknown decisions because of it. Now, with metrics, the receiver can be reduced to a "quantifiable, rationalizable, largely consumptive aggregate" (Anderson, 2011, p. 550). In short, the web audience was no longer passive; it was a living, breathing force that told its wants and needs to the content producers on an almost minute-by-minute basis through the metrics software (Anderson, 2011).

Subsequent research of behaviors by journalist found that web clicks are the new currency for newsrooms. In a survey of 318 newsroom gatekeepers, Vu (2014) concluded that “gatekeepers who attach the importance of high readership to economic benefits are more likely to have different news decisions based on web metrics” (p. 1094). The audience clicks even drive story placement on news websites (Lee, Lewis, & Powers, 2014), thus further shifting the agenda-setting function away from the newsroom gatekeepers to news readers.

While rules for traditional journalistic standards vary from news site to news site, it is generally accepted within the industry that the First Amendment watchdog mission has three broad strokes: to be the independent eyes and ears for the community; to be a check on government actions; and to give a voice to the voiceless (Ward, 2015). As the 19th-century fictional character Mr. Dooley famously stated, the role of a newspaper was to “afflict the comfortable, and comfort the afflicted” (Shedden, 2014). For this research, “watchdog” is defined as any story that exposes governmental abuse of power, wasteful spending, insider deals and favoritism, malaise or inaction when action is needed, corruption and incompetence (Ward, 2015).

The palpable conflicts between traditional journalistic standards and metrics-driven news decisions raise other questions that are still being explored by researchers. A recent survey of journalists concluded that the better a reporter’s analytical metrics skills, the more likely he or she will use social media and metrics to develop watchdog stories (Tandor & Ferrucci, 2017). Attitude toward metrics is everything; those who understand metrics will use it more often as feedback on the stories they write (Tandor & Ferrucci, 2017).

Because many media companies run both websites and newspapers, it is accepted in the industry that there are two distinct audiences, each with distinct demands. Newspaper readers are

skewed toward older while web users are younger. What does well on the web (a viral celebrity story, for example), may not play well on the front page of the newspaper, where paying readers demand harder, more in-depth news. On the other hand, investigations that do well with a print audience and provoke policy changes seldom see high metrics on the web. Gannett's 2014 Picasso project (renamed Newsroom of the Future in 2015 to give it a clearer direction, although both terms are interchangeable) has tried to encourage the practice of traditional journalistic First Amendment values by adding "time on story" and mandating watchdog stories through memos and contest incentives (Gannett Co. Inc., 2016).

Research Questions

With metrics changes happening in the news media industry, this research seeks to answer the impact of metrics on the watchdog (also known as investigative) role of journalists at news sites. The research would seek to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What methods do reporters most commonly use for story selection?

RQ2: What role does metrics play in selecting a story idea?

RQ3: What role does the traditional government watchdog play in selecting a story idea?

RQ4: What role do watchdog stories play in readership growth?

Method

This study used a mixed-method based on three facets of research: a secondary analysis of raw online story metrics for 25 months from a major East Coast online newsroom to determine the types of stories that the public reads most often; a national survey of professional journalists; and in-depth interviews with journalists at an East Coast news site with varying years of experience.

Secondary Analysis of Online Story Metrics

This study examined 200 news stories per month over the 25-month period (January 2016 through January 2018), for a total of 4,998 stories. About 900 stories are produced each month for a total of 22,500 over two years. The 200 stories per month were selected because that is the download limit of Omniture, the online metric tracking software used by the East Coast news site. The monthly download is determined by order of page views, from highest to lowest. The final sample size (4,998 stories) will be 22 percent of all stories (900 stories per month x 25 months, or 22,500) produced, but in most cases the top 200 accounted for about 75 percent (1.075 million / 1.43 million average views in December 2017) of all page view traffic each month. Stories ranked below 200 come in with fewer than 1,000 page views, while the top stories of the month can exceed 20,000 page views each.

Each story is tagged in the content management system by a writer or editor based on the story's topic. The researcher will have no input into how a story is classified. The tags are later sorted by Omniture into several general topics, such as investigations, local news, weather and breaking news. The automated sorting removed from the analysis any subjectivity of the researcher.

The operational definition of a watchdog story was garnered from the major East Coast newsroom story content. The 2017 stories classified by the newsroom as watchdog ranged from daily stories on governmental problems to deep-seated, long-term investigations. Daily stories included: a top city official filing for personal bankruptcy; the federal government seizing documents from the county government for a criminal probe; ethics charges filed against a school board member; and property tax revaluation problems within a municipality.

Longer-term investigations included: a series on how the government subsidizes slum landlords and how abused tenants have nowhere to turn; an investigation into a multi-million-dollar welfare fraud ring; an investigation into the theft of government money by a not-for-profit special education center; and how members of a powerful drug cartel moved their families into local neighborhoods.

Stories analyzed for this study were placed into six groups: crime; local news; watchdog/investigative; politics; education; and other. The first five groups were generated by Omniture. The “other” category was created by the researcher by adding together the remaining minor categories. Stories were reviewed two ways for this analysis: Total raw page views and the ranking system set by the East Coast newsroom’s internal tracking algorithm. The algorithm uses a formula to rank stories on a 1 to 100 scale, with 100 being the highest score given to the top story each month, compared to other stories in the same monthly period, regardless of category. This East Coast newsroom scale uses the following formula to calculate the rank for each story: (page views multiplied by 70%) + (unique visitors (an indicator of audience growth) multiplied by 15%) + (average seconds spent on a story multiplied by 15%). The result is divided into the top story value for the month, thus always ensuring that the best performing story receives a score of 100. Example: The top story for December 2017 was an investigation into a new drug cartel. It received a score of 100 for the month with 54,000 page views, 48,000 unique readers, and an average read time of 1 minute. The cartel story’s combined metric score was 45,009, the highest in the group. It automatically received the ranking score of 100 in the tracking system. Metric scores from each story below 45,009 are then divided by 45,009. The next highest story could receive a ranking score of 45, for example, with its metric score of 20,254 divided by 45,009. The 200th story of the month, a local politics article, received a low score because it had

1,400 page views, 1,100 uniques and a 98 second read time. Its metric score came to 1,160. The ranking formula $(1,160 / 45,009)$ produced a ranking score of 2.6 out of 100.

The secondary analysis of stories showed if reporters were writing more or fewer watchdog stories, if those stories were getting higher or lower page views, and if the stories were getting higher or lower scores on East Coast newsroom's ranking system. If metrics are the new currency for content creators in newsrooms (Vu, 2014), then reporters should write more stories that rank higher on the metric scale and write fewer stories that do poorly on the same scale. The questions here are if watchdog stories do well under the East Coast newsroom's metric rubric and if reporters adjust their story selection based on the metrics. The one lurking variable would be spoken and unspoken pressure from management to write watchdog stories to meet First Amendment responsibilities.

Reporter Survey

An anonymous, online survey of professional reporters was conducted over four months in 2017 and 2018 via three methods. The first method asked editors of several digital news sites across the country, with whom the researcher is professionally acquainted, to pass the survey to their reporting staffs. The second method sent email solicits to popular journalist list servers, IRE-L (Investigative Reporters and Editor) and NICAR-L (National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting). IRE-L has a membership of 844 and NICAR-L has a membership of 2,766, based on the standard, automated email summaries that are returned after each post. However, there is no way to telling how many of the members are reporters (versus editors, students and academics) or are active on the listservs. The third method posted survey invitations to the Facebook pages of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) and the national Society of Professional Journalists

(SPJ). NABJ has about 600 members and NAHJ has about 2,000 members, according to both groups' membership information. SPJ states on its website that it has about 9,000 members include students, academics, retirees and editors. It cannot be determined how many members are active reporters.

Respondents were promised that their answers to the survey would be anonymous. As an incentive, they were offered a chance to enter a separate drawing system for two \$50 VISA gift cards. The survey asked that only reporters answer the questions.

The survey asked respondents several questions that took about 5 minutes to complete. These questions focused on answering RQ1 on methods relied on for story selection, RQ2 on the role of metrics in story selection and RQ3 on the role of watchdog function. RQ4, on the impact of watchdog stories on readership growth, was answered by a combination of the survey, the secondary analysis of online story metrics and in-depth interview process.

The survey asked four demographic questions – gender, age group, region of employment and years of professional reporting experience. One question on source selection used a rank response scale and most other questions used a five-point Likert response scale. The questions were developed based on the researcher's 30-plus years of newsroom and online experience. Sample questions were tested in a newsroom to determine if the questions asked provided clear answers. The questions are based on the researcher's national investigative experience and his work with reporters and management to implement a metrics-driven news environment at his work site. The literature review shows scant research on this topic in regards to questioning of watchdog journalists and metrics. Please see the Appendix A for the verbatim questionnaire.

Pre-testing of the survey was done with journalists (N = 4) outside the newsroom. The final survey used a request and Survey Monkey link sent via email through the listservs to about

3,500 members, with two follow-up emails, and postings on the Facebook pages of the above-noted groups. The survey responses were downloaded into Excel and imported SPSS for analysis.

Interviews

The final segment of this research included purposive in-person, in-depth individual interviews with reporters and editors at the East Coast news site, all known to the researcher. The reporters were selected to ensure a balance in their years of experience, from beginning career to senior staffer. Editors were asked on a general basis since there are few in the newsroom. The number of interviews was based on saturation of responses (Saunders, et al., 2017). The interviews ceased when most responses fell into a similar pattern. The qualitative data analysis used the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) and the open coding method of “breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 61). The review also relied on the procedures used by Weblers et al. (2016) and Lee, Lewis, and Powers (2014) that examined discrepancies between the quantitative data and the responses from the interviews.

The subjects were told that their responses were for academic research only, that openness was encouraged through anonymity and that their responses will not be shared with any other staffer or manager in the newsroom. They were also told that they were free not to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. The interviews were done to examine any hidden qualitative factors that may be hard to obtain through the quantitative analysis of the data and to answer the “why” question behind the quantitative results.

The interviews focused on attitudes, based on RQ3 and 4, across reporting experience/age ranges and to see if managers have different views from those of his/her subordinates. Weblers et

al. (2016), Vu (2014) and Tandor and Ferrucci (2017) found that interviewing journalists brought forth a different perspective on the data collection, even stark contrasts between what web editors said and what the metrics bore out (Weblers et al., 2016). Please see Appendix B for the verbatim interview protocol used.

The interview sessions were taped and transcribed, and then coded into relevant categories by the researcher. These findings were compared to the quantitative results of the survey and metrics data.

Metrics Data Analysis

The East Coast news site metrics were analyzed with Excel and Excel's pivot tables. Each of the 25 months was downloaded from Omniture and imported into Excel. "Month" and "year" columns were added to each downloaded sheet and the metrics categories (crime; local news; watchdog/investigative; politics; education; and other) were parsed into a new column for further analysis. All 25 months/sheets were combined into one dataset and examined with Excel's tools. The analysis used frequencies of six categories to examine story trends especially on whether watchdog stories are more popular than others.

The survey data was studied with frequencies, standard deviations, bivariate correlations between variables to test for influences (Tandor & Ferrucci, 2017), and nonparametric one-sample chi-square tests.

To answer RQ1 on the methods reporters mostly use for selecting story topics, the survey question asked them to rank eight commonly used reporting methods: readers, social media, government officials, government actions, tips from sources, editors, other media reports and others, from highest to lowest. Simple frequency analysis was used to identify the most popular channel.

The following survey questions were asked on five-point Likert scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree to further explore the commonly used reporting methods: “I see stories that interest only me;” “I routinely review web-based audience feedback on my stories;” “I rely on social media to help me find stories to write about;” “I routinely chat with the audience through social media;” and “I seek out watchdog stories on a regular basis.”

Responses to each question were analyzed with frequencies and one-sample chi-square test.

To obtain a complete picture, the qualitative interview question on the preferred channel of getting watchdog story ideas was analyzed to complement the quantitative data.

In order to answer RQ2 on the role metrics has on story selection, the following survey questions were presented to respondents on five-point Likert scales: “I always seek stories that will boost my metrics;” “I feel my manager is only concerned about me growing my web metrics;” “I rely on web-based audience feedback to help me make editorial decisions in my stories;” “I avoid stories that I feel will not perform well on the web, even though I think they may be important for the public to know;” “I have total freedom in selecting the stories to write about;” “My manager always tells me what to write about;” and “I have seen my story web metrics grow over the last 12 months.”

Responses to each question were analyzed with frequencies and one-sample chi-square test.

On the other hand, the interview questions explored the metrics effect on story selection. They are: “Do you think metrics directly affect how you select stories?”; “Do you think watchdog stories help, hurt or have no effect on your metrics? Why?”; “Do you review your

watchdog story metrics frequently, or at least once a day?"; and "Would you change anything regarding watchdog stories and metrics?"

In order to answer RQ3, the role of government watchdog in story selection, the following survey questions on the five-point Likert response scales were asked: "I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics, compared to non-watchdog stories;" "If I had a choice between writing a watchdog story that will lead to changes and help the community, or writing a lighter 'viral' story that would generate much bigger web metrics but help no one, I would choose to do the watchdog story;" and "I did more watchdog stories in the last 12 months than in the previous 12 months."

Responses to each question were analyzed with frequencies and one-sample chi-square test. On the other hand, the interview asked qualitative questions on the role of watchdog stories on story selection as well. They are: "Thinking back to your last few watchdog stories, please tell me how you got the idea for the story or where the story idea came from" and "Do you like doing watchdog stories? Why?"

The final RQ4 asked what role do watchdog stories have on readership growth. One of the survey question using the five-point Likert response scale on "I have seen my story web metrics grow over the last 12 months," measures the growth. And the other question using the five-point Likert response scale explores the reason of the growth: "I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics;" therefore, a bivariate correlation was run on them to test for whether watchdog story may drive the readership growth.

RQ4 on readership growth also relied on the 25-month analysis of the raw story metrics from the East Coast media site to determine if watchdog stories are dominating and driving audience growth, or if some other story factor is coming into play. Qualitative data also

provided insight into readership growth. The interview questions asked on this point are: “Could you tell me what you consider to be a watchdog story and give me an example of any story that fits the bill?”; “How many watchdog stories have you done so far in the past two months?”; “What do you see as the priority for you, as a reporter (or editor), in the newsroom, in light of the metrics?”; “What is your view of how the company sees watchdog stories?” and “Do you think metrics directly affect how you select stories?”

Analysis

The survey data were studied with frequencies, standard deviations, bivariate correlations between questions to test for influences (Tandor & Ferrucci, 2017), nonparametric one-sample chi-square tests. These results were matched against the empirical review of story metrics for the 25 months and the comments from the interviews.

Results

Sample Profile

Among the 146 respondents, the gender ratio was very close to even (49.3% were male and 50% were female, with 0.7% not reporting). Among the four age groups (21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51 and above), the largest cohort was the 21-30 group (45.9%). The years of professional experience ranged from 1 to more than 16, with the largest cohort being the 4-to-10-year group (35.6%). Nearly one-third of the respondents (30.8%) worked in the Northeast with the second largest group coming from the Midwest (24.7%). The smallest group hailed from the Southeast (Florida and the Carolinas, 5.5%). Of the 150 total responses, four were discarded before the analysis: Three said s/he was not a reporter and the fourth response was blank.

Type of Study

To answer the four research questions, this study used a mixed-method analysis approach: a review of internal news story metrics data (N = 4,998) from a major daily news site on the East Coast; statistical analysis of the survey data; and interviews with six reporters of varying professional journalism experience (Reporter A = 1-5 years; Reporter B = 6-10 years; Reporter C = more than 11 years; Reporter D = 6-10 years; Reporter E = 6-10 years; and Reporter F = more than 11 years); and two newsroom editors (Editor 1 and Editor 2, both with more than 20 years news experience), for a total of eight interviews with working journalists.

The anonymous online survey reached an estimated 5,000 members² of the two investigative listservs, IRE-L and NICAR-L; and the National Association of Black Journalists, National Association of Hispanic Journalists, and the national Society of Professional Journalists through their Facebook pages. The survey was also distributed to an estimated 200 general news reporters through purposeful contacts with editors at various newsrooms across the country. Therefore, the response rate was around 3 percent, which was not a great response rate but please note that journalists are busy professionals and there was no funding for this research.

For the statistical study of the survey results, alpha is set at .05.

RQ1: What channels do reporters most commonly use for story selection?

Respondents were asked to rank from highest to lowest their most frequently used source for finding news stories. The eight options were: Readers (in-person, phone calls or email); social media comments; government officials; governmental actions (votes, agendas, proposals);

² The active reporter membership may be much lower in that there is no way to determine the number of professional reporters, student members, editors, teachers or if users have dropped off for a variety of reasons. With this mind, the active-member response rate may be higher than what is reported from the overall total number of members.

tips from sources; an editor; other media reports; or another unspecified source. The range was 1 for least used to 8 for most used.

“Tips from sources” ranked the highest (M = 6.21, SD = 1.86) followed by “governmental actions” (M = 5.96, SD = 1.95). See Table 1 on mean score ranks of all the eight sources. The mean ranking suggests that despite nearly a decade of social media interaction within the news reporting landscape, reporters remain heavily vested in one-on-one source development in their hunt for news stories. Digital interaction with readers through social media, email or even in-person takes a rear seat in the story-selection bus. Social media comments (M = 3.35, SD = 2.15) and tips from readers (M = 4.24, SD = 1.92) fell below traditional sourcing avenues. (See Table 1 for details).

Table 1

Most Used Sources Ranked by Reporters to Find Stories (ranking scale of 1 to 8, with 8 being the most used)

Variable	M	SD
Tips from Sources	6.21	1.86
Govt. Actions (votes, agendas)	5.96	1.95
Editor	4.83	2.10
Readers (calls, email, in-person)	4.24	1.92
Other Media	4.51	2.08
Govt. Officials	3.88	1.84
Other Sources	3.56	2.50
Social Media	3.35	2.15

Note. N = 142

For further analysis, the topmost selection (the value of 8) in each of the eight categories was compiled into a new variable and tested with a one-sample chi-square. Reporters selecting “tips from sources” significantly stood out from the rest of the group with M = 6.21 and $X^2(7, N = 140) = 104.91, p < .01$, which confirmed the No. 1 mean ranking of “tips from sources” in regards to the story selection channel. The second was “govt. actions” with M = 5.96.

One survey question that probed sourcing channels found that about half of the queried reporters to use social media to find stories. The question, “I rely on social media (story comments, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) to help me find stories to write about,” asked respondents to rate their experiences on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” The responses showed that “agree” and “strongly agree” accounted for 46.3% of the total ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.01$). A one-sample chi-square test showed a statistical significance for the “agree” answers, $X^2(4, N = 146) = 60.51$, $p < .01$. The results confirmed that many reporters in the survey do use social media as a channel for at least some story ideas.

Another question along the digital interaction line asked “I routinely chat with the audience through social media” and 48% of the respondents said they agreed with that statement ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 1.12$). While the one-sample chi-square showed statistically significant support of “agree,” $X^2(4, N = 146) = 45.37$, $p < .01$, the results of this question and the one before it suggest that reporters do engage with their readers and draw at least some story tips from the conversations.

A summary of the RQ1 survey questions suggests that while reporters do use social media and online readers to find story ideas, they still rely heavily on sources that they trust to tip them off to news items and routinely dig through government records as a secondary method.

The interviews also seemed to confirm this trend. The six reporters and two editors defined a watchdog story in similar terms as described by Ward (2015), and said tips for watchdog stories generally expose government issues that affect the public.

Interviewed Reporter A (1-5 years’ experience) said s/he finds story ideas by looking for news trends within the community. After seeing two isolated incidents involving housing, s/he dug further and found “lax oversight (by the government) that was ripe for watchdog reporting.”

Reporters B and E (6-10 years' experience each) said they relied on crimes records and instinct to find stories. However, Reporter C, with more than 11 years' experience, said s/he found the online community beneficial: "I use social media a lot. A lot of Twitter posts from reporters that I follow a lot. Some readers will reach out occasionally" to suggest story ideas.

A qualitative analysis that used multiple passes through the interviews in a method described by Jomini Stroud (2011) found that of the six reporters, three primarily relied on sources for story ideas, one on social interactions and one by reviewing story metrics. The two editors said they believed most reporters relied on sources for story tips.

RQ2: What role does metrics play in selecting a story idea?

Survey questions that focused on RQ2 on the role of metrics in story selection were compiled into a new variable, where the sum of the answers from each respondent was added and then divided by the number of questions asked. The questions used a 1-5 Likert scale, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." In this case, there were six questions focused on the metrics pressures:

- "I feel my manager is only concerned about me growing my web metrics;"
- "I always seek stories that will boost my web metrics;"
- "I rely on web-based audience feedback to help me make editorial decisions in my stories;"
- "I avoid stories that I feel will not perform well on the web, even though I think they may be important for the public to know about;"
- "I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics, compared to non-watchdog stories,"
and;
- "I have seen my story web metrics grow over the last 12 months."

This composite summary variable found that on average reporters aren't so concerned about metrics ($M = 2.71$, $SD = .54$). With a mean of 2.71, which is between disagree and neutral, the average score suggests a general attitude towards the disagree end.

To explore further, a one-sample chi-square on "I will always seek stories that will boost my metrics" turns out to be significant, $X^2(4, N = 146) = 78.11$, $p < .01$. (See Table 2 for details). It suggests the "disagree" category was chosen by most respondents (67 of 146, or 45.9%), and strongly agree had the least choice (1 of 146, or .69%)

Table 2

Question: I Always Seek Stories That Will Boost my Web Metrics

Variable	Frequency	%
Strongly Disagree	25	17.1
Disagree	67	45.9
Neither Disagree nor Agree	30	20.6
Agree	23	15.8
Strongly Agree	1	.69

Note. $N = 146$, $X^2(4, N = 146) = 78.11$, $p < .01$

To understand the relationship between reliance on reader feedback and metrics growth, a bivariate correlation was run on the questions of "I rely on web-based audience feedback..." and "I have seen my story metrics grow over the last 12 months." The results showed a positive relationship, $r(145) = .28$, $p < .01$, albeit the .28 correlation coefficient is a weak relationship.

The survey responses appear to show that most reporters say they don't seek out viral, or clickbait, stories to boost their metrics. However, the reporters do appear to review their metrics as a way to help them fine-tune their story-selection process. In short, while most reporters won't chase the proverbial cat-in-tree clickbait story, they will review their story metrics and audience feedback to understand what the readers want to read about.

Most interesting is the feeling that reporters do not see their managers as metrics ogres running 21st-century Dickensian workhouses. In the question, "I feel my manager is only

concerned about me growing my web metrics” most answered with “disagree” (54 of 145, or 37.2%). (See Table 3 for details). The one-sample chi-square showed a statistically significant rejection of “agree,” $X^2(4, N = 145) = 40.55, p < .01$.

Table 3

Question: I Feel My Manager is Only Concerned About Me Growing My Web Metrics

Variable	Frequency	%
Strongly Disagree	27	18.6
Disagree	54	37.2
Neither Disagree nor Agree	32	22.1
Agree	26	17.9
Strongly Agree	6	4.1

Note. $N = 145, X^2(4, N = 145) = 40.55, p < .01$

Reporter A, 1-5 years’ experience, sums up the work demand in a personal way: “I understand that metrics is important, but getting good metrics isn’t my ultimate priority.”

One of the features of the East Coast newsroom’s ranking metrics system is that it gives weight to stories that encourage readers to spend more time reading them. This is meant to encourage higher-quality content and watchdog reports to attract repeat visitors rather than metrics that measure only raw page views.

Reporter C (more than 11 years’ experience) said that while “numbers are the biggest priority” management and the corporate front office send mixed messages – get big numbers, but also do in-depth stories:

We got the board that ranks us (by most page views), but then we get blended scores that mix in (reader) time (on the story). I prefer time (metrics) hands down. I want readers to stick with me for the entire story...I think they get more perspective and more context.

Editor A said s/he is not a metrics hawk: “I have a general awareness of what works and what doesn’t work” without having to track overall trends.” There is still pressure from above for reporters. S/he said that it is her/his job to “keep people focused on the bigger prizes, the stories

that are going to pay off because we can't afford to do stories that don't resonate with their readers.”

Editor B said metrics is a seesaw. “When a watchdog story hits, it is great for metrics. But the time before the story hits, that time is not so good for metrics.”

Interviews seemed to suggest some reporters believed in metrics for story development. For instance, Reporter B, with 6-10 years' experience, said s/he embraces metrics feedback from readers as sort of a news divining rod. “I honestly think metrics are essential. If we are spending months on a story and it does not generate metrics online, we are shouting into the void.”

Reporter F, with more than 11 years' experience, said management and metrics encourage reporters to “step around” low-performing content, like planning board meetings. That directive allows reporters to “focus on watchdog stories that will be of wide interest.”

In summary, all six reporters and two editors said they monitor their metrics at least once a day. Five of the six reporters said they use metrics to help guide their next story choice, which the sixth reporter said he sometimes uses metrics for guidance. Both editors said they think metrics sometimes helps guide reporters, a seeming disconnection between what reporters are practicing and what editors believe reporters are doing.

RQ3: What role does the traditional government watchdog play in selecting a story idea?

RQ3 takes us to the core mission of the First Amendment, keeping watch over those in power.

The survey results indicate that most respondents seek watchdog stories and that writing watchdog stories does not hurt their metrics.

In the metrics review of the East Coast newsroom's 25-month story list, the top six categories of stories, in order of highest page views to lowest, were: local (17.1 million page

views with 2,172 stories); crime (10.4 million, 1,321 stories); watchdog/investigations (3.3 million, 322 stories); politics (2.2 million, 429 stories); education (1.3 million, 221 stories); and other (3.1 million for 22 categories, 535 stories). Of note is the “local” category includes some viral content, major weather events and court hearings of notorious defendants.

Stories classified as watchdog (N = 322) ranged from a serial investigation into police brutality to short daily stories questioning municipal taxes and spending. During the same period, about four times more crime stories (N = 1,321) and five times as many local-interest stories (N = 2,172) than watchdog stories ran on the website. However, watchdog stories attracted more readers, on average, than crime stories. For the 25-month period, the watchdog stories outperformed local and crime content regarding readers per story. The average “local” story saw 7,885 page views and the average crime story garnered 7,852 page views, while an investigative story averaged 10,390 page views – a 32 percent boost for watchdog over local and crime page views. In regards to the internal metrics ranking system, local, crime and watchdog stories were evenly matched for the year. Local, crime, politics and watchdog each had stories that ranked as the top monthly story at least once during the 25-month period. Local was the top story (with a metrics rank of 100 out of 100) 10 time; crime eight times; politics four times; watchdog/investigations two times; other one time; and education none.

In one example, an investigation into a new drug cartel was the top story for December 2017, earning 54,000 page views, an average of 55 seconds read time and 48,000 new, or unique, readers, for a perfect monthly metrics score of 100. The next highest story was a historical look at a major 1992 storm with a metrics rank of 45.

The next month, January 2018, a quadruple New Year’s Eve murder (in the breaking news category) was the top story of the month, with 286,000 page views and 95,700 unique visitors. However, the average readership time was just 23 seconds.

Time on story, a sign of reader interest in the content, was longest for watchdog stories at an average of 51 seconds. Crime and local were 43 and 45 seconds, respectively, on average, over the 25-month period. (See Table 4 for details).

Table 4
Average Time Reader Stays with a Story, by Category

Category	Time on Story (Seconds)
Watchdog	51
Education	47
Local News	45
Crime	43
Politics	46
Other	46

Note. N = 4,998. “Other” includes multiple categories including religious news, national and national news, traffic reports, “weird” news, health, history, and general state news.

Most telling, however, is the growth of page views and time on story over the 25-month period. Watchdog stories saw the greatest jump in average time, from an average of 44 seconds in 2016 to 55 seconds in 2017 to 76 seconds for January 2018. Crime stories, on the other hand, saw a wobble from an average of 42 seconds in 2016 to 44 seconds in 2017 to 40 seconds in 2018. Local content held steady at about 43 seconds reading time per story. Politics rose from 44 to 49 seconds and education dropped from 47 to 43 seconds, on average, over the 25-month period.

The high average page views and nearly 2-to-1 read time for watchdog stories over crime stories seem to support the findings of the survey and comments from the interviewees.

Respondents and reporters stated that watchdog stories do well for their metrics and that they are doing more watchdog stories now than in the past 12 months.

Therefore, the East Coast metrics seem to suggest readers do care about watchdog stories. For reporters, the survey measured the watchdog role in story selection with four Likert-scale statements:

- "I seek out watchdog stories on a regular basis;"
- "I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics, compared to non-watchdog stories;"
- "If I had a choice between writing a watchdog story that will lead to changes and help the community, or writing a lighter 'viral' story that would generate much bigger web metrics but help no one, I would choose to do the watchdog story," and;
- "I did more watchdog stories in the last 12 months than in the previous 12 months."

The sum of each of the four questions was compiled into a new variable and divided by four to create an index. The 1-5 Likert scale was used for each question, with 1 representing "strongly disagree" and 5 representing "strongly agree." This new index showed that on average most reporters said they were tuned into pursuing watchdog stories ($M = 3.82$, $SD = .65$). For the third question of: "If I had a choice between writing a watchdog story that will lead to changes...", 88 of 146, or 60.3%, said they "strongly agree" with that statement, with 30.8% saying they "agree," 4.8% were neutral and 4.2% disagree or strongly disagree. (See Table 5 for details). The question also had a statistically significant chi-square, $X^2(4, N = 146) = 190.85$, $p < .01$.

Table 5

Question: If I had a Choice Between Writing a Watchdog Story that Will Lead to Changes and Help the Community, or Writing a Lighter “Viral” Story that Would Generate Much Bigger Web Metrics but Help No One, I Would Choose to do the Watchdog Story

Variable	Frequency	%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.1
Disagree	3	2.1
Neither Disagree nor Agree	7	4.8
Agree	45	30.8
Strongly Agree	88	60.3

Note. N = 146. $X^2(4, N = 146) = 190.85, p < .01$

When reporters were asked if they “did more watchdog stories in the last 12 months than in the previous 12 months,” 49 of 145, or 33.8%, agreed with that statement and 13.8% said they strongly agreed, for a combined 47.6% in the two agree columns. For the question, “watchdog stories do well for my metrics,” 56 of 146, or 35.4%, saying they “agree” and 16.4% saying they “strongly agree,” for a combined 51.8% in the agree columns. (See Table 6 for details). One-sample chi-square on the “do well” question strongly and significantly rejected the notion that watchdog stories are, well, metric dogs, $X^2(4, N = 146) = 61.53, p < .01$.

Table 6

Question: I Think Watchdog Stories Do Well for my Metrics, Compared to Non-Watchdog Stories

Variable	Frequency	%
Strongly disagree	6	4.1
Disagree	14	9.6
Neither disagree nor agree	46	31.5
Agree	56	38.4
Strongly agree	24	16.4

Note. N = 146. $X^2(4, N = 146) = 61.53, p < .01$

For the question of “I seek out watchdog stories...,” 57 of 145, or 39.3%, said they “agree” and 34.5% said they “strongly agree,” for a combined 73.8% in the agree columns.

Reporters may feel empowered to pursue watchdog stories out of a sense of civic duty or simply the thrill of uncovering a hidden issue. Said Reporter D, 6-10 years’ experience: “When a

watchdog story runs, it's the closest thing to getting that journalism adrenaline...you start to see your reporting is having an impact.”

Reporter A, 1-5 years' experience, said there is a sense of righting wrongs:

I prefer to do a watchdog story that uncovered something, that didn't get a lot of hits, then write a cornball piece about kittens that breaks the website. But you do use metrics to learn what works and what is interesting to the public. I don't think they are mutually exclusive. One editor and three reporters said watchdog stories do boost their metrics performance,

while two reporters and one editor said watchdog stories mostly help. One reporter said he had mixed feelings on the subject and thought watchdog stories can miss their mark and fail to produce big page views.

Seven of the eight journalists interviewed said local management supports watchdog efforts. The eighth, a reporter, said he saw conflicts in the messaging. Also, distance did not make their heart grow fonder of corporate oversight many miles away in a different state. When asked if they thought the national corporation supported watchdog efforts, just one said yes. Four said they receive conflicting messages from the main office – get big numbers, but do deeper stories that take time – one was unsure, one said s/he had mixed feelings, and one said HQ did encourage investigative work.

The quandary with the staff may be due to the lack of clarity in messaging from the company. The growth of daily metrics is reinforced every day through meetings, messages and monthly reviews. But it is also a longstanding tradition at the East Coast newsroom to chase watchdog stories (Kassel, 2018) and the parent company has a nationally renowned watchdog staff at the highest levels to ensure the First Amendment mission is executed. The company runs quarterly and annual contests that reward the best watchdog content with cash incentives and public praise from top executives. But it also offers tacit embarrassment to the local editors by posting daily metrics with red bars showing below-average performance.

Editor B noted that not all watchdog stories produce sizable page views and that it is difficult to gauge the public's appetite for a topic. "It's like you are being asked psychically to know what the public's reaction will be. It's impossible to know sometimes. It makes it that more difficult" for reporters to decide when to write a daily story and when to write a watchdog story, the editor said.

RQ 4: What role do watchdog stories play in readership growth?

A look at the East Coast newsroom metrics data, survey results, and the interviews show there are strong indications that watchdog stories boost web metrics. The respondents to the survey questions say, on average, that they feel that watchdog stories help their metrics and that they have done more watchdog stories in the last year than in the year before.

The East Coast metrics data seems to support these statements. There were 132 watchdog stories published in 2016 and 165 in 2017. For the first month of 2018, 23 watchdog stories were written, nearly twice as many (N = 13) in January 2017. Watchdog stories nearly tripled page views from 2016 to 2017, rising from 750,000 in 2016 to 2.3 million in 2017. The spike in 2017 was driven by one major corruption investigation that garnered more than 1 million page views in a month.

For several other major, long-term investigation published in 2017 and 2018, each showed substantial boosts in the East Coast's page views, unique visitors and average time on story. (See Table 7 for details).

Table 7

Watchdog Story Impact with Average Reader Seconds on Story and Page Views by Month

Year and Month	Avg. Seconds on Story	Page Views
2017		
January*	54.8	62,452
February	63.7	47,244
March	61.9	39,594
April	76.5	36,133
May	60.3	64,485
June*	58.2	1,462,706
July*	43.7	365,421
August	40.4	88,961
September	35.2	40,262
October	No wd stories published	NA
November	58.4	29,217
December*	59.4	97,288
2018		
January*		240,560

Note. A “*” denotes publication of a major long-term investigation. Source: East Coast watchdog metrics.

To test reporter perceptions, three survey questions asked about watchdog stories and metrics on the Likert scale. Bivariate correlations examined the relationship among:

(Q1): “I did more watchdog stories in the last 12 months than in the previous 12 months.”

(Q2): “I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics, compared to non-watchdog stories.”

(Q3): “I have seen my story web metrics grow over the last 12 months.”

The results indicate a positive relationship among all three. Q1, “I did more watchdog stories in the last 12 months...” and Q2, “I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics...” showed $r(145) = .22, p < .01$. Q1 correlated to Q3, “I have seen my story web metrics grow...” $r(145) = .23, p < .01$, but the low correlation coefficients of .22 and .23 may indicate there are other factors at play within the relationships.

The survey correlation results indicate that reporters not only believe watchdog stories do well for their metrics, but they have also seen their metrics grow in the last years because they have done more watchdog stories in that period.

All six reporters interviewed said knowing what readers tune into is an essential facet of story selection, even for watchdog articles. “The metrics help guide the effectiveness of our communication,” Reporter B said. Reporter A said each month s/he writes about five watchdog stories and 20 non-watchdog stories.

Reporter D, 6-10 years’ experience, said s/he had seen sizable page view boost when a watchdog story runs, but that is just half of the formula for story success. “A story that performs well isn’t celebrated because it performed well (in metrics). It has to have some journalistic integrity behind it.”

All six reporters and two editors say that metrics are a part of newsroom life and a successful career entails balancing watchdog stories with non-watchdog stories (features, routine community news, and light or viral content) to keep the metrics train running. Writing watchdog-only stories would produce fewer articles while writing routine or viral stories would diminish their sense of being a journalist.

Reporter E, 6-10 years’ experience, summed up the feeling this way:

It makes me feel really good to see a lot of people read a (watchdog) story that I put a lot of work into, but it also provides encouragement to do that kind of journalism.... readers are just hungry for that accountability.

Of the eight journalists interviewed, three said they would not change the current metrics tracking system, which focuses exclusively on numbers or quantity. The remaining five, however, said the page views of a watchdog story should be balanced with a qualitative measurement of community impact – like a law being changed, wasteful spending being exposed

or a uncovering a social ill – to ensure watchdog stories stand in league with high-page view stories like major breaking news or viral content.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study investigated a critical question facing current-day journalism: Is the quest for bigger online newsroom metrics killing off watchdog stories? The results from the mixed-method used in this study – internal story metric data from a major East Coast newsroom, survey of professional journalists and in-person interviews with journalists – strongly indicate that watchdog journalism is thriving and such work can lead to metric growth for the reporter and news site as a whole. Survey Responses and interviews, though, exposed a complex relationship between reporters and the metrics system used to track their work. As much as reporters say they do not live or die by management’s call for higher metrics each month, many survey respondents and most interviewees say they do consult their daily story metrics, and to some extent social media, to see the types of stories readers are consuming. Their quest, they say in the interviews, is to better understand how readers react to stories. The reporters say metrics feedback allows them to craft better stories and fine-tune the tailoring of their reports to meet their readers’ expectation. This complex relationship can easily and frequently shift from a reporter using metrics in a one-way manner to essentially read the tea leaves of reader wants, to fully engaging in a two-way conversation with readers through social media chats and story comment/email conversations.

Reporter/Metrics Feedback Loop

The research project suggests that a majority of reporters enjoy pursuing watchdog stories and they will do so even if they think a watchdog story will not earn them metrics gold. However, although reporters seem to largely eschew management’s drive for raw metrics

numbers, reporters do take the numbers seriously for their job needs. By using metrics to dissect reader habits and needs, reporters are constantly modifying their feedback loop by adjusting their story selection behaviors, a 21st-century approach to the reader-to-journalist connection outlined by Scheufele (1999) before newsroom metrics were widely used. Today, when the reporters' drive to uncover problems through watchdog reporting is mixed with the metrics feedback, the reporters seem to be able to finetune their practices and write watchdog stories that appeal to the readership. The readership, in turn, rewards the reporters with higher-than-average metrics both regarding page views and readership time. That "journalism adrenaline," as described by one reporter, encourages many reporters to chase after more watchdog stories, those closing the reporter/reader feedback loop.

Four Phases of the Feedback Loop

The research questions probed four aspects of journalistic behavior: The channels reporters use most often for story ideas (Phase I of the reporter/metrics feedback loop); the impact of metric pressures on story selection (Phase II); the effect of metrics on the traditional watchdog role of journalists (Phase III); and what drives online readership growth (Phase IV). (See Figure 1 for details).

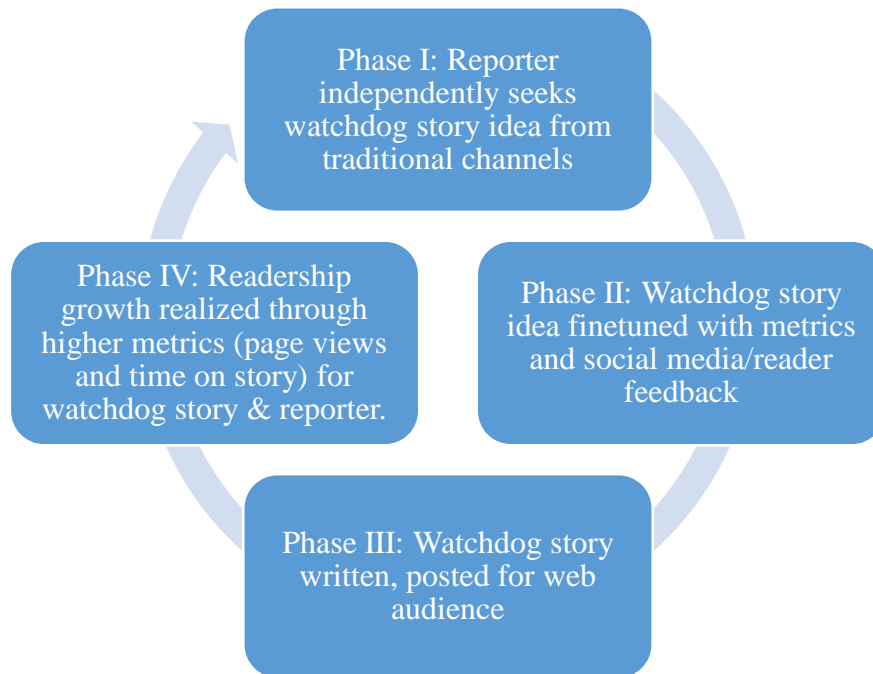


Figure 1. Four Phases of the Reporter/Metrics Feedback Loop

Vu (2014) and Anderson (2011) found that measuring metrics, as a key part of a journalist's daily life in a corporate newsroom, has shifted the traditional gatekeeping role away from editors and into the hands of reporters. Newsroom metrics have become the new currency of power, with the coins of the realm mostly held by reporters (Weblers et al., 2016). As traditional media have the agenda-setting power to establish discussion topics in politics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), this new-found independence to select stories and spark social/political conversations, which may be unknown – or unrealized – by the clear majority of journalists is, nonetheless, real. Regardless of their awareness level, reportorial actions, even inactions, can have consequences on a community when it comes to reporters fulfilling their traditional First Amendment watchdog roles. What if reporters did no watchdog stories out of fear that the numbers wouldn't be as good as video stories about pets on surfboards? Would bad politicians run amuck, wasting millions of tax dollars? It is these questions that propelled this research project.

Phase I on Channels for Story Ideas

The results of this study indicate that while reporters may pay attention to the metrics pressure their employers place on them, it appears that it has not diminished their drive to chase watchdog stories. In Phase I of the feedback loop, reporters seem aware of their First Amendment powers and want to use them to keep watch over government and report on anything else that goes bump in the night. The results indicate that reporters mostly use tried-and-true methods to find watchdog stories and have used social media tips for some success.

Of the surveyed reporters (N = 146), many said they develop stories the old-fashioned way, through tips from sources (36%) and reviewing government actions like votes, proposals, and agendas (24%). The digital environment of social media, story comments and other online interactions seemed to have minor impact on the hunt for stories. Reporters interviewed said using trusted sources helps them quickly find watchdog stories while social media comments from readers usually involve broad statements and few specifics.

Phase II on Metrics Impact on News Stories

Reporters appear to have a collective sense of community responsibility. While most accept the reality of metrics pressures from management, they say they seek out stories that will make a difference in the community rather than chasing clickbait or viral stories with no community impact. In Phase II of the feedback loop, reporters say metrics are not the be-all, end-all of their jobs. More than 90 percent of the survey respondents said they would rather do a meaningful watchdog story that gets fewer page views than a crowd-pleasing viral story, like celebrity news or a cute animal video.

Reporters said they are buoyed when watchdog stories do well. Questions that probed how reporters saw their metrics indicated that most strongly believed that writing watchdog

stories not only boosted their numbers but that they did more watchdog stories in the last year than in the previous year. All answers showed that reporters responded around the 50% agreement rate. Phase II of the reporter/metrics feedback loop indicates the reinforcement of numbers on watchdog story selection.

In-depth interviews with reporters bore out this strong affinity for watchdog stories, with one saying, “I prefer to do a watchdog story that uncovered something, that didn’t get a lot of hits, then write a cornball piece about kittens that breaks the website.” In fact, all the interviewees stated that they chase watchdog stories on a regular basis because of their drive to do meaningful work that helps the community.

Phase III on Watchdog Stories vs. Metrics

The review of 25-month of news metrics on stories (N = 4,998) from the East Coast newsroom indicated that watchdog stories do have a positive impact on story metrics. Metrics high numbers can be dichotomized with two types of stories: reactive and proactive. Reactive stories come mostly from breaking news – fires, murders, weather events, traffic accidents and the like – that provides real-time information to the community. Proactive, or watchdog stories, are ones developed by reporters to reveal issues that are not apparent – government mismanagement, corruption, wasteful spending, inside political deals and the like – which provides new information to the community. As breaking news is routine and posted daily, watchdog stories take longer to develop and are posted when the critical elements are confirmed. The interviews suggest that reporters are taking control of their story metrics by actively seeking watchdog stories. While reporters cannot choose the timing of a breaking news story (a fire or plane crash, for example), they can control the tempo and rhythm of when they post watchdog content. This allows astute reporters, the research suggests, to boost their personal story metrics

on their schedule while fulfilling what they see as their First Amendment duty to the community. The overall story metrics data from the East Coast news site also suggests that major investigations do boost readership growth, sometimes to heights that exceed breaking news numbers. Watchdog content may be written less frequently than breaking news content, but high-impact watchdog stories commonly outperform breaking news stories in terms of average page views and time on story, the East Coast news site data show.

Phase IV on Watchdog Stories Role in Readership Growth

On surface, from the sheer volume perspective, breaking news story metrics seem to run about three times higher than those watchdog stories. However, the evidence suggests that watchdog stories do help with readership growth when they are focused on topics that spark community interest. The review of the East Coast newsroom data indicates readership growth developed through watchdog efforts can boost metrics beyond 1 million page views for one month, which supports the survey results of most respondents, and comments from reporter interviews. The interviewees all said they saw personal metrics boosts due to watchdog stories.

Also, on average, watchdog stories were found to hold even with breaking news and local stories. However, when dynamics such as time-on story and unique viewers are factored in with page views, watchdog stories can exceed the metrics of local and crime stories, and routinely show higher average page views per story. Moreover, the examination over the 25-month period showed that more watchdog stories were written in 2017 than in 2016, and 2018 is on track to break the 2017 number by several dozen stories, which suggests there is a trend in writing more watchdog stories over the years to grow readership. While many factors influence readership growth at the East Coast news site – a major storm, for example, can balloon metrics upward for a month – the news site did see a substantial readership growth from January 2016 through

December 2017. For the same number of stories tracked each year by Omniture (N = 2,400), the 2016 total page view number was 13.3 million. The 2017 total page view number was 21.8 million. More than 2.3 million of the 2017 page views came from watchdog stories, up from 750,000 in 2016, a strong indicator that watchdog content does help readership growth year-over-year.

As part of the fourth phase, reporters said they try to use the metrics numbers smartly to understand what readers want by reviewing how they have responded to similar stories in the past. A positive correlation was found between reporters routinely reviewing audience feedback on stories and the metrics growth or readership growth in the last year.

While media companies openly push for bigger metrics from newsrooms to drive ad revenue, the postmodern gatekeepers – reporters – appear to be setting the agenda that dovetails with the traditional First Amendment watchdog role. Reporters seem to be fulfilling the watchdog role on their own, driven by their internal desire to do more meaningful work. As the four phases of the reporter/metrics feedback loop indicate, the reporters start with traditional sources for story ideas, then the reporters' work gets assessed by their audiences. Thus, reporters' metrics grow because of the audiences' desire to read in-depth investigative reporting. Once the loop is closed – the reader gets what he or she wants from a story and the reporter sees higher metrics – the cycle renews, reinforcing the growth of watchdog stories in the online newsroom.

To answer the title of this research – are newsroom metrics killing watchdog reporting? – the single word answer is no. The evidence from this research indicates that watchdog stories are growing because of the intertwined relationship between writer, reader and the metrics that connects the two through the feedback loop.

Implications for Media Companies

The findings in this study may be useful to media companies that want to explore new ways reporters can use the metrics information to develop more watchdog stories that will appeal to their online audiences. For example, a company could closely track watchdog content and query reporters with high metrics to better understand the particular methods they used to connect with their audiences. A company could also track reporter/reader interaction on social media to see if there is a strong correlation between a reporter who communicates more with readers online, especially social media and their higher watchdog metrics.

Companies may also use questions from this survey data to build their internal examinations to understand better how their employees interact with readers online and develop watchdog stories.

Limitations and Future Study

The number of survey respondents was not large enough for a more in-depth analysis that would look at how gender, region and age groups may differ in their responses to the questions.

The study did not consider compensation plans that may reward content that drives bigger metrics. Obviously, compensation models can alter employee behavior. Newsrooms that pay reporters for just raw page views could be seeing different outcomes regarding source channels, story selection and watchdog writing. A suggestion for a future study would ask about pay incentives to get a better understanding in this area.

Also, the nature of the survey may have attracted respondents who have a stronger interest in watchdog reporting than those who don't write many watchdog stories. In regards to the interview, all the interviewees are from the East Coast news site, known to the researcher,

which could have skewed the responses. While all were given anonymity and asked to provide honest answers for academic research, efforts to impress the interviewer could not be ruled out.

Further research could expand to investigate the interaction between corporate mandates and reporter perceptions and the attitude of newsroom managers when it comes to metrics. The research should also seek a larger pool of respondents from across the nation, and conduct interviews between a researcher and subjects who do not know each other professionally.

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Appendix A

Survey on Metrics and Watchdog Stories

Cover Letter

Story selection survey

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Participant:

You are being invited to take part in a research study about how content creators (reporters) identify and select watchdog stories in a newsroom driven by web metrics results. The goal of the study is to understand how reporters view watchdog stories, how story metrics may influence the selection of watchdog stories, and what sources reporters use to find stories. You meet the conditions of being a candidate respondent in taking the survey. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of several hundred reporters asked to do so. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes to complete

In appreciation for your time, you can enter a drawing for a \$50 VISA gift card. Details are at the end of this survey.

The person in charge of this study is Paul D'Ambrosio, a long-time investigative editor and reporter, Gannett employee and graduate student in the Department of Journalism and Strategic Media at the University of Memphis. He is being advised by Dr. Jin Yang, associate professor of journalism, at the University of Memphis. By doing this study, we hope to acquire and learn more in-depth knowledge about how reporters select stories.

As you may know, Paul is the News Director at the Asbury Park Press and a top-level supervisor. While you may have a professional relationship with him, this is research for academia. The topics covered in the interview are the same topics reporters and editors talk about on a routine basis during the workday, such as how to find watchdog stories. This research simply delves into details about the sources you use to find such stories. The questions asked are designed to be neutral and there is no right or wrong way to respond.

There is no more than minimal risk involved in this study, and you will not get any direct personal benefits from this study either. However, your willingness in participating in this study will help us researchers understand more about story selection and may help journalist better understand how watchdog stories fit into their story selection process. If you don't want to participate in the study, you can leave the website by closing the browser now. If you are willing to participate in the study, your time and efforts are greatly appreciated. The survey takes about 5 to 10 minutes to finish.

This study is **anonymous** meaning there is no link between your personal identifiers and your responses to the questionnaire. Your responses will be combined with others' responses for statistical analysis. IP tracking has been turned off on Survey Monkey.

If you have any questions in regards to taking part in the study, please ask Paul now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Paul D'Ambrosio at pdmbrosio@memphis.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. The approved study is numbered PRO-FY2017-361.

Screening question

Are you a reporter? Yes/No. If yes, please continue the survey. If no, you don't need to take the survey. Thank you!

Ranking question

Please rank, from most frequent to least frequent, the sources you use to determine your next story topic, with "1" being the most frequent and "8" being the least frequent. Please place a number 1 to 8 in the blank space provided after each source.

Readers (in-person, phone calls or email) _____

Social media comments _____

Government officials _____

Government actions (votes, agendas, proposals) _____

Tips from sources _____

An editor _____

Other media reports _____

Other _____ Please specify _____

Likert Scale questions

Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree to the following 15 statements. Please circle one choice for each statement.

- 1) - I feel my manager is only concerned about me growing my web metrics
1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 2) - I seek stories that interest only me
1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 3) - I rely on social media (story comments, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) to help me find stories to write about
1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 4) - I always seek stories that will boost my web metrics
1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 5) - I routinely review web-based audience feedback on my stories
1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 6) - I routinely chat with the audience through social media
1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree

- 7) - I rely on web-based audience feedback to help me make editorial decisions in my stories
- 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 8) - I avoid stories that I feel will not perform well on the web, even though I think they may be important for the public to know about
- 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 9) - I have total freedom in selecting the stories to write about.
- 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 10) - My manager always tells me what to write about
- 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 11) - I seek out watchdog stories on a regular basis (watchdog stories are those that deal with government spending, government action or inaction, or investigations into corruption, malfeasance and/or inside political deals)
- 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree
- 12) - I think watchdog stories do well for my metrics, compared to non-watchdog stories
- 1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree

13) - If I had a choice between writing a watchdog story that will lead to changes and help the community, or writing a lighter “viral” story that would generate much bigger web metrics but help no one, I would choose to do the watchdog story.

1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree

14) - I have seen my story web metrics grow over the last 12 months

1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree

15) - I did more watchdog stories in the last 12 months than in the previous 12 months

1 – Strongly disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Neither disagree or agree; 4 – Agree; 5 – Strongly agree

The following questions are about you

Please write your gender here _____.

Please indicate an age group you belong to by circling the bullet before the age group.

• 21-30;

• 31-40;

• 41-50;

• 51 and above

Please indicate the region of the country that you work in by circling the bullet before the region.

- Northeast
- South
- Southeast (Florida, Carolinas)

- Midwest
- West

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Cover Letter

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

The impact of a metrics-driven newsroom on watchdog journalism

You are being invited to take part in a research study about how content creators (reporters) identify and select watchdog stories in a newsroom that is driven by web metrics results. **The goal of the study is to understand how reporters view watchdog stories, how story metrics may influence the selection of watchdog stories, and what sources reporters use to find such stories.** You meet the conditions of being a candidate for this confidential interview process. If you volunteer to take part in this study, you will be one of about **four** people to do so.

The person in charge of this study is Paul D'Ambrosio, a graduate student in the Department of Journalism and Strategic Media at the University of Memphis. He is being advised by Dr. Jin Yang, associate professor of journalism, at the University of Memphis. By doing this study, we hope to acquire and learn more in-depth knowledge about how reporters select stories.

Paul D'Ambrosio will be conducting the interview alone. As you know, Paul is the News Director at the newspaper and a top-level supervisor. While you have a professional relationship with him, this is research for academia. The topics covered in the interview are the same topics reporters and editors talk about on a routine basis during the workday, such as how to find watchdog stories. This research simply delves into details about the

sources you use to find such stories. The questions asked are designed to be neutral and there is no right or wrong way to respond.

The interview between you and Paul will be recorded for accuracy, but the recording will not be shared and will remain under his control at all times. The recording will be on his personal cell phone, of which only he has the password. The recording will be transcribed onto his personal home computer, of which only he has the password. The recording and any notes will be destroyed once the research is done. This is totally anonymous and no one, not even his adviser, will know you and Paul talked about this topic. Nothing you say will be shared with anyone in the workplace or with other supervisors.

Paul's adviser, Dr. Yang, can be contacted via email at jinyang@memphis.edu or by phone at 901.678.5148 to verify this research or if you have any questions.

There is no **more than a minimal risk** involved in this study, and you will not get any direct personal benefits from this study. However, your willingness in participating in this study will help us researchers understand more about story selection and may help journalists better understand how watchdog stories fit into their story selection process. **This is strictly a voluntary interview. If you don't want to participate in the study, you can disregard this invitation, or end the interview at any time for any reason, or no reason at all. There will be no consequences if you choose to end the interview or choose not to participate.** If you are willing to participate in the study, your time and efforts are greatly appreciated, and **will help further research in this area of journalism. The interview will take about 30 minutes.**

This study is anonymous meaning there is no link between your personal identifiers and your responses. Your responses **may** be combined with other interviews **in the final report.**

If you have any questions in regards to taking part in the study, please ask now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Paul D'Ambrosio, at pdmbrsio@memphis.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of [authorized] person obtaining informed consent

Date

Interview demographics

Interviewer: _____ Location: _____ Date: _____

Length of interview in minutes: _____ Age of subject: _____

Education level: _____ Profession: _____

Family status: _____

Job position: _____

- 1) How did the interviewee appear to me? _____

- 2) Atmosphere and location of interview: _____

- 3) Motivation for interview? _____

- 4) Type of eye contact, gestures or non-verbal cues: _____

- 5) Interaction during the interview or difficult areas to talk
about: _____

- 6) Three main points the that interviewee made: _____

Interview Questions

- 1) I am conducting academic research into how reporters select watchdog stories in a metrics-driven newsroom, such as this. Could you tell me what you consider to be a watchdog story and give me an example of any story that fits the bill?
- 2) Thinking back to your last few watchdog stories, please tell me how you got the idea for the story or where the story idea came from. (For editor, the question will be, do you know how reporters find their watchdog stories?)
- 3) Do you review your story metrics frequently, or at least once a day? (If yes, ask follow up): What do you see as the priority for you, as a reporter (or editor), in the newsroom, in light of the metrics?
- 4) Do you think watchdog stories help, hurt or have no effect on your metrics? Why?
- 5) Do you like doing watchdog stories? Why? How many have you done so far in the past two months?
- 6) Do you think your immediate supervisor encourages, discourages or has no bearing on the watchdog stories you write?
- 7) What is your view of how the company sees watchdog stories?
- 8) Would you change anything regarding watchdog stories and metrics?
- 9) Do you think metrics directly affects how you select stories?

Appendix C

IRB approval

Date: 5-9-2018

IRB #: PRO-FY2017-361

Title: The impact of a metrics-driven newsroom on watchdog journalism

Creation Date: 2-14-2017

End Date: 3-3-2018

Status: Expired

Principal Investigator: Paul D'Ambrosio

Review Board: University of Memphis Full Board

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
Submission Type	Renewal	Review Type	Unassigned	Decision	

Key Study Contacts

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Member	Jin Yang	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	jinyang@memphis.edu
Member	Paul D'Ambrosio	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	pdmbrosio@memphis.edu