Is “doing well” doing any good? How web analytics and social media are bringing about a new journalistic norm

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Resumo

Este estudo examina como jornalistas on-line definem uma frase comumente ouvida no ambiente de redação online: o que significa se uma história está “indo bem”? Por meio de análise qualitativa das respostas obtidas por pesquisa com 206 editores on-line, tal estudo encontrou cinco categorias gerais de definição: a) receber muitos leitores; b) obter altas métricas de audiência; c) ser compartilhada nas mídias sociais; d) ser comentada pelos leitores; e) contribuir aos papéis sociais do jornalismo. A plausibilidade dessa prática emergente como uma nova norma jornalística é, então, discutida.

Palavras-Chave: nível de audiência; norma jornalística; métricas; qualidade da notícia; valores de notícia; normas; mídias sociais.

Abstract

This study examines how online journalists define a phrase commonly heard in online newsrooms: What does it mean if a story is “doing well?” Through qualitative analysis of survey responses from 206 online editors, this study found five general categories of definition: a) getting a lot of readership; b) getting high audience metrics; c) being shared on social media; d) being talked about by readers; and e) contributing to journalism’s social roles. The plausibility of this practice emerging as a new journalistic norm is discussed.

Keywords: audience size; journalistic norm; metrics; news quality; news values; norms; social media; web analytics.

* Tradução de Tatiane Gonsales.

1. Introduction

A new pay-scheme is emerging in an industry in a frantic search for a sustainable business model. Now that newsrooms are able to track the number of views each story gets through web analytics, a growing number of content contributors are paid “by the click.” Gawker, a popular blog focusing on viral celebrity and human interest stories, is among those at the forefront of this shift (Fischer 2014b). It has launched a program where participants are paid $5 per 1,000 unique monthly visitors their contributions bring to the site (Fischer 2014b). The rationale for this? The company’s editorial director said a pay-per-click scheme would motivate writers to come up with their “best work” (Fischer 2014b).

This pay-per-click scheme is just one emerging newsroom practice brought about by the widespread diffusion of new information technologies, particularly social media and web analytics, across newsrooms. Social media and web analytics provide journalists immediate access to an unprecedented wealth of information about what audiences want based on a number of quantifiable metrics: clicks, time spent on the site, Facebook likes, retweets, and many others (Author 2014a, 2014b). Such quick and easy access to audience information is becoming part of the journalistic routine, introducing new experiences, challenges, and opportunities to journalists. Balancing what the audience wants and needs has become more salient than ever before. News is an unusual product, and journalism is as much a form of public service as it is a business (Baker 2002). The press is considered the fourth estate, and is charged with important social functions (Schultz 1998, Christians et al. 2009) but is at the same time an industry that needs revenues to stay alive (Baker 1994, 2002). This tension is most pronounced in a period seeing traditional journalism struggling for survival. Such tension is bringing about not only new practices and routines, but also new norms.

Studying journalistic norms is important because norms influence social identities and subsequent behaviors (Christensen et al. 2004, Interis 2011, von Wright 1969). New practices and routines are emerging and can potentially bring about new norms as journalists adopt and adapt new technologies in the newsroom. For example, an increasing number of journalists now compare their editorial judgment with figures from web analytics programs (MacGregor 2007). A survey of top-level editors found that 25% of those interviewed use web analytics to evaluate the performance of their reporters and editors (Author, 2013). Online editors now pay attention to social media as platforms for dissemination and feedback (Lariscy et al. 2009). These new practices are bringing about a new measure of journalistic performance in the newsroom—what journalists mean with the now commonly used phrase “doing well” in describing journalistic outputs (Author, 2014a). What do journalists mean when they assess a story to be “doing well”? This study is focused on explicating this new standard in assessing the performance of news products, arguing that it appears to represent a new norm in the journalistic field.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What are Norms?

Numerous studies about journalism refer to, if not focus on, particular journalistic norms, such as objectivity (e.g. Skovsgaard et al. 2013, Lowrey 2003, Nishikawa et al. 2009), truth-telling (e.g. Singer 2007), and transparency (e.g Karlsson 2011). But this prevalence comes at the expense of taken-for-grantedness: Many studies about journalists and journalism often refer to norms without defining what constitutes a norm to begin with, assuming, perhaps, that the concept of norms has become a key concept that requires no elaboration.

Several theories evaluate the concept of norms, yet no single, agreed-upon definition exists (Hage 2005). Some scholars referred to norms as constituting prevalent behaviors (e.g. Interis 2011) while others referred to norms as “moral prescriptions for social behavior” (Schudson 2001, 151). Legal scholars also referred to a norm as “something ought to be, or ought to be done, although actually it may not be done” (e.g. Kelsen

1959, 107). Others argued, however, that unless an obligatory behavior is prevalent, it doesn't constitute a norm (Interis 2011). Thus, what other scholars have done is distinguish between descriptive and injunctive norms (Christensen et al. 2004, Lapinski and Rimal 2005). The dimension of prevalence—how widespread a behavior is—leads to the conceptualization of descriptive norms. Thus, descriptive norms "refer to beliefs about what is actually done by most others in one's social group" (Lapinski and Rimal 2005, 130). In contrast, injunctive norms include a sense of obligation motivated by "a desire to avoid social sanctions" (Lapinski and Rimal 2005, 130). This dichotomy is parallel to the distinction between the realist and idealist ontologies of norms (von Wright 1969). Norms, in other words, can refer to: "(a) what is commonly done or (b) what is commonly approved and disapproved" (Kallgren, Reno, and Cialdini 2000, 1002). Norms operate at the collective and individual levels. Collective norms "serve as prevailing codes of conduct that either prescribe or proscribe behaviors that members of a group can enact" (Lapinski and Rimal 2005, 129). Perceived norms, on the other hand, refer to how individuals interpret collective norms (Lapinski and Rimal 2005).

2.2. How Do Norms Come About?

The literature on norms identifies two reasons for the existence and persistence of norms. First, norms are important because they are believed to influence subsequent behavior (Interis 2011, von Wright 1969). Particular norms persist because of their ability to influence particular actions. But when norms become less efficacious—that is, when they no longer affect behavior—they become useless and eventually disappear (von Wright 1969). Second, norms are also important for social identity (Christensen et al. 2004). They serve as markers that help in-group members distinguish themselves from non-members or what is considered as outgroup. In-group norms therefore help members shape their social identities and sense of belonging. In this perspective, "normative behavior represents a way of generating positive distinctiveness" (Christensen et al. 2004, 1295). However, injunctive norms are said to be more relevant for social identities than descriptive norms (Christensen et al. 2004).

Understanding how norms come about is important because of their central role in social identities and human behavior. While descriptive norms come about through the prevalence of certain behaviors, the origin of injunctive norms is a more complex question. In organizational settings, norms are passed on through formal and informal training (Nishikawa et al. 2009). It is possible that descriptive norms ultimately turn into injunctive norms or, in other words, that "widespread-ness contributes to prescriptiveness" (Schudson 2001, 151). When the majority adopts a particular behavior, this may create an expectation for other members. It is also true, however, that many widespread behaviors do not carry inherent prescriptive force. For example: "Most people like to eat ice cream but no one insists that those who do not like it have failed to live up to a morally important requirement" (Schudson 2001, 151).

Understanding the emergence of norms requires taking into consideration the historical, cultural, and social context surrounding them. It requires understanding "not only the general social conditions that provide incentives for groups to adopt 'some' norm but the specific cultural circumstances that lead them to adopt the specific norm they do" (Schudson 2001, 165).

This current study is focused on a journalistic practice that is becoming widespread in online newsrooms—invoking the standard of "doing well" (Author, 2014a). Studying this emerging practice is important because—based on the theoretical framework that explains how norms come about—this widespread-ness might lead to prescriptiveness. This emerging standard is also born out of the current social and cultural circumstances that surround the evolution of the journalistic field.

2.3. Journalistic Norms

Journalism as a specialized field operates with its own set of norms (Bourdieu 1998, 2005). Such norms function as a way to distinguish journalists from other types of mass communicators, especially in a field where the claim to professionalization remains shaky (Nishikawa et al. 2009, Singer 2007, Konieczna 2013). The importance of journalistic norms is demonstrated by discourses on what constitutes quality journalism. For example, studies have used the phrase "news quality" almost interchangeably with "excellence" (e.g. Bogart 2004, Gladney 1996), but others stressed the importance of distinguishing between the journalistic quality of an organization and the excellence of individual journalistic works (Shapiro, Albanese, and Doyle 2006). Scholars have looked at various ways to measure quality, focusing on content, investment, expert ratings, and circulation, among others. These varying definitions of quality journalism clearly refer to journalistic norms.

Scholars started focusing on content as a "performance determinant" for newspapers in the 1960s against the backdrop of intense competition (Rosenberry 2005). For example, scholars have looked at the source of stories, geographic location of story subjects, type of coverage, diversity of coverage, tone of stories, fairness and balance in reporting, among others, as measures of newspaper quality (Lacy and Bernstein 1988, Peake 2007, Rosenberry 2005, Culbertson 2007, Lacy and Fico 1990). Other scholars measured news quality by asking a pool of experts to judge superior and inferior journalistic products (Stone, Stone, and Trotter 1981). For example, a popular and easy way of gauging journalism quality—based on awards—is determined by the use of ratings of a panel of judges (Shapiro, Albanese, and Doyle 2006). Some argued for an "investment model" of quality (Scott, Gobetz, and Chanslor 2008). Since television news production is costly, "the resources devoted to the production of news are a revealing indicator of the organizational commitment to news quality" (Scott, Gobetz, and Chanslor 2008, 89). Other scholars operationalized news quality by asking journalists themselves. For example, Bogart (2004, 40) noted that despite the challenges in defining journalism excellence, journalists in the United States agree on what constitutes quality, referring to such words as "integrity, fairness, balance, accuracy, comprehensiveness, diligence in discovery, authority, breadth of coverage, variety of content, reflection of the entire home community, vivid writing, attractive makeup, packaging or appearance, and easy navigability." Building on these criteria, a survey of newspaper editors found five main factors to measure quality, namely: ease of use, localism, editorial vigor, news quantity, and interpretation (Kim and Meyer 2005).

One of the most enduring norms in journalism is objectivity. Criticisms to its inherent weaknesses as a standard notwithstanding (Schudson 2001, Morris 2007, Boykoff and Boykoff 2007, Glasser 1984), journalists across many countries still adhere to the objectivity norm (Skovsgaard et al. 2013)and thus the norm must be interpreted by journalists in their daily work. Based on a journalist survey among Danish journalists (N = 2008. Believed to have originated in the American press, objectivity has been described as the "supreme deity" of American journalism (Mindich, 1998, p. 1) and "guides journalists to separate facts from values and to report only the facts" (Schudson 2001, 150). It has shaped particular news writing styles and practices, such as writing in the third-person, getting the other side, and exclusion of the journalist's own opinions. However, objectivity has also become an excuse to avoid more fieldwork, with journalists relying on quotes and information from opposing sides to avoid libel suits and meet deadlines (Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1972).

The digitization of journalism is rapidly changing the field. This evolution also renews focus on existing norms, such as accountability (Singer 2007), while highlighting emerging ones, such as transparency (Phillips 2010). User participation and the non-stop news cycle which characterize online news are said to be "essential in transforming journalistic norms when journalism moves online" (Karlsson 2011, 279). Personal blogs may not be objective, but many

of them are transparent, socializing information consumers to a new standard to assess journalism (Plaisance 2007, Craft and Heim 2009). The comments section also allows audiences to voice out their concerns and critiques not only about news items but also about news coverage itself (Karlsson 2008). But aside from interactivity and immediacy (Karlsson 2011), new audience information systems—particularly web analytics and social media—are restructuring interactions between journalists and their audiences, plausibly bringing about new journalistic norms as well.

2.4. Web Analytics and Social Media

New technologies in the newsroom confront journalists with new experiences and expectations. When these technologies are normalized in the newsroom—that is, when they are adapted to fit existing routines and standards (Singer 2005, Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2011)—they also bring about new experiences that can lead to new practices that, if they become widespread, can also become part of what is expected of journalists. In the conceptualization of norms, new technologies can bring about descriptive norms that can contribute to new injunctive norms. Such a process can start with individual journalists improvising with new technologies to match expectations by the organization. For example, observations at a nonprofit news organization found that "new issues are dealt with through improvisation, which over time can become informally coded into a new set of norms" (Konieczna 2013, 60). It is through this process that the organization can influence how a widespread practice can becomes an injunctive norm: "Individuals work within the structures and normative patterns of complex organizations and occupations, and the organization's size and constraints have an important impact on the effect of occupational norms and values" (Lowrey 2003, 139). Two new technologies widely adopted in newsrooms are web analytics and social media.

Newsrooms have embraced the technology of web analytics (Lowrey and Woo 2010, MacGregor 2007, Vu 2013) which allows editors to monitor audience behavior on their websites in real time (Napoli 2011). Web analytics involves measuring, collecting, analyzing, and reporting internet data to understand and optimize web usage (Karr 2011). Third-party analytics programs, such as Omniture, Chartbeat, and Visual Revenue (Yang 2012, Marshall 2012), allow the collection and analysis of audience metrics—various quantitative measures of what audiences do online (Krall 2009). For example, editors can access information about the number of unique visitors to the site, the average time visitors spend on the site, the number of views each page gets, the geographic location of visitors, the websites that refer them to the news site, and many others (Kaushik 2010, Napoli 2011). This is far from the audience research of old, when audience feedback came in the form of phone calls to the newsroom or letters to the editor (Gans 1979, Schlesinger 1978).

Information from web analytics initially influenced only the placement of stories (Anderson 2011, Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2012). For example, a comparison of the most popular stories from websites and the stories prioritized by journalists based on placement on their respective homepages found that the former influenced the latter (Lee, Lewis, and Powers 2012). The most popular stories are the ones highlighted in the homepage. Thus, editors were no longer only using their supposedly autonomous news judgment to select the most important stories at the moment; there are times when they defer to the judgment of the audience. But as web analytics became more institutionalized in the online journalistic field, its influence increased to the other stages of the news process as well, including selection of stories and photographs, and even evaluation of editors and reporters (Vu 2013, Fischer 2014b).

Stories that get a lot of traffic also get promoted, with the hopes that doing so will generate more traffic (Author, 2014a). This is where the use of web analytics intersects with social media. An increasing number of journalists are using Facebook and Twitter (Lariscy et al. 2009, Lysak, Cremedas, and Wolf 2012), social media platforms that promise opportunities to interact with the audience but which most journalists use mainly to promote their news content (Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton 2011). Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter not only provide avenues for journalists to share their content and for readers to comment, but they also allow quantification of audiences, in the form of countable likes and retweets (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013). They provide another channel where newsrooms can track and quantify their audience and evaluate the performance of their stories.

Feedback from the audience, now quantified and reported in real time through web analytics and social media, is increasingly influencing editorial decision-making. An interview with editors revealed that many of them now compare their editorial hunches with actual audience data from web analytics (MacGregor 2007). A survey of newspaper editors in the United States found that the goal of increasing traffic, guided by information from web analytics, has become an important determinant in making content changes (Vu 2013). Thus, the economic constraints that the journalistic field is facing due to a shrinking audience for traditional news media play an important role in explaining the use of web analytics in most newsrooms today (Lowrey and Woo 2010, Vu 2013). Editors are now willing to adjust editorial decisions based on web analytics because of the "perceived economic benefits of getting readership" (Vu 2013, 11). The more economic uncertainty editors feel, the closer they monitor audience metrics (Lowrey and Woo 2010).

Web analytics and social media, however, are influencing not only journalistic routines, but also very likely including journalistic standards. This study focuses on understanding how web analytics and social media influence journalistic standards by focusing on how journalists define "doing well" in the context of journalism outputs online. It is a phrase that has become common in online newsrooms, mentioned during editorial meetings and casual conversations about story planning and assessment (Author, 2014a). Online editors are rarely heard praising a story to be objective, transparent, or truthful. But the phrase "doing well" to describe a story is becoming a staple in newsroom conversations. What do journalists mean when they refer to a story "doing well?"

3. Method

This study is based on an online survey of online editors in the United States. The population is based on the database provided by CisionPoint which compiles a list of media contacts from the United States and a few other countries (Telecomworldwire 2011, Lewis and Zhong 2013). The database allowed filtering based on location (only those working within the United States), medium (only those working for online platforms), topic (only those involved in news operations), and position (only those with editor-level positions). This sampling scheme yielded 3,697 online editors from different levels of the hierarchy, from web editors to editors in chief. Some 1,100 editors were randomly selected and were sent email invitations to take the survey. They were also offered $10 gift cards in exchange of their participation. Following four reminders over a four-week period, at least 206 completed the survey. The average age of the respondents was 44.5 years (SD = 11.41 years). Some 32% were web editors while some 25% were editors-in-chief. The average number of unique monthly visitors was 4.08 million (SD = 18.7 million). The huge variance shows the wide distribution of organizations represented in the study in terms of audience size. Some 44.2% reported working for news organizations that also publish a daily newspaper, 20.4% with a weekly paper, and 9.2% with a television station. The majority of the respondents (67%) were males.

The questionnaire used in the survey asked a variety of questions, but one question pertinent to this current study is an open-ended question that was focused on an emerging newsroom practice. The question asked the participants: "Newsrooms usually talk about a story 'doing well' online. In your own experience, what does it mean if a story is 'doing

well'?" There was no word or character limit for the responses; respondents could write as much or as little as they felt sufficient to answer the question. We collected the responses and analyzed them using qualitative textual analysis.

3.1. Data Analysis

Qualitative textual analysis aims to be "systematic and analytical but not rigid" (Altheide 1996, 16). Using the constant comparative method devised by Glaser and Straus (1967), we began analysis without having pre-determined the nature or range of categories or "codes." Instead, our attention was focused on emergent themes within the data. First, we used open-coding to generate initial themes prevalent in the data. Such a process began with each researcher taking a "long preliminary soak" (Hall 1975, 15) in the entire dataset to establish familiarity and context, followed by repeated rounds of analysis focused on "pattern recognition" (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, 232), with detailed notes taken throughout. Then, axial coding was used to refine the disparate initial codes and bring "previously separate categories together under a principle of integration" (Lindlof and Taylor 2002, 221). Such a process entails looking for theoretical commonalities between and among codes.

4. Results

The following five categories of how online editors define a story "doing well" emerged during the analysis: readership, traffic, engagement, conversations, and journalistic values. This section presents the range of definitions that the editors offered while also examining them through the prism of traditional journalistic norms.

4.1. Readership

Some online editors in the survey referred to size of readership in general terms, echoing traditional discourse of audience size that characterized early definitions of news quality (e.g. Lacy and Fico 1991). For example, one editor said doing well meant "being read, understood, and passed along." This refers to the basic journalistic role of dissemination, with the use of the phrase "passed along" carrying remnants of print journalism. This small group of editors clearly equated doing well with a sizable audience, but it is interesting to note that despite the function of web analytics to quantify the audience, quantification is missing in their definitions. For example, an editor said doing well meant "being read by a high percentage of readers" while another said a story was doing well if "lots of people are reading it." The connection is mostly implicit in these definitions—readership is important because it can be converted into advertising revenues. But the editors spoke in general, almost traditional, terms.

4.2. Traffic

The next category also focuses on the audience, but in contrast with the previous, this group of editors referred to actual information yielded from web analytics. For example, one editor said that "traffic is the biggest indicator" of a story doing well. Others referred to having "a large number of hits," "getting clicks," and "attracting page views," clearly displaying familiarity with web analytics jargon. "Hits" refer to files loaded in a single page. "Page views" refer to how many times a page is viewed by a visitor, regardless of how many hits (or files) are loaded in the page. Unique visitors refer to the number of people accessing a web page based on cookies from websites deposited in a computer when a website is rendered by a web browser. The web analytics industry has largely shifted from hits and page views to unique visitors for the standard measure of online traffic, and yet even unique visits are not entirely reliable, as computer users can delete cookies from their browsers (see Benkoil 2010, Krall 2009). New metrics are emerging (Fischer 2014a), but many newsrooms still depend on these metrics to quantify the audience.

Other editors were more specific in their use of these metrics by mentioning specific numbers. The numbers ranged from having more than 1,000 unique visitors to having more than a million clicks. These editors also qualified their definitions in relation to the size of the markets where their newsrooms operate. One editor said: "If a story reaches 1,000 page views, that's good in our market." Similarly, another editor said: "I work for a massive website, so a story that is 'doing well' usually receives more than 1 million clicks over a 24-hour period. My best story got 13 million visits in 24 hours." One editor even offered a typology of story performance based on number of hits:

> If it has over 3,000 hits over the course of a day, I'd say it did *"well."* If it has over 5,000 hits, I'd say it did *"very well."* If it has over 10,000 hits, I'd say it did *"great"* [our emphasis].

Other definitions referenced metrics other than page views, hits, and unique visits. One editor referred to whether the story "exceeds the average visits or page views for a normal story," while another referred to whether "a story makes it to the top 5 most read stories of the day." In these instances, the editors referred to how web analytics allowed them to compare stories based on traffic. For example, an editor shared that in their newsroom, the "best 'doing well' story captured 7,000 page views in a single day; second best, 5,000." But for some editors, doing well meant attracting a particular subset of the online audience—the "right traffic." One editor referred to "getting a relatively large number of 'in-market' page views, which generate more ad revenue." Another editor said: "A story that is 'doing well' is attracting page views, particularly from within our DMA." The term DMA, which stands for "designated market area," comes from Nielsen's classification of areas in the United States as television markets for ratings purposes. Applied to news websites, it is used to refer to one's target audience, usually local. Targeting a local audience is clearly linked to generating advertising revenues which, for many news sites in the United States, usually come from local advertising. For example:

> A story doing well means two things—one, that it's bringing in traffic. Two, that it's bringing in the *right kind of traffic*. The right traffic is engaged and social and within our *target audience*. In essence, it's sticky [our emphasis].

4.3. Engagement

Many editors also referred to engagement, although what they meant with engagement varied. An editor said a story doing well has "high readership, high engagement" while another said a story did well if it "has both reach and engagement." Most of the time, when the editors referred to engagement, they associated it with social media. For example, one editor defined a story doing well as: "A story that generates a lot of comments, likes and shares. This means we are *engaging* readers [our emphasis]." Another editor also said: "If it is shared, liked, re-tweeted or commented on in any social media capacity or within the site, that means it has done well online. The number of said actions indicates *exactly how well* [our emphasis]." These comments, likes, and shares occur within social media platforms—third-party applications that are outside news websites, but are apparently considered as measures of a successful story. An editor said: "Doing well to me means it has received a great deal of engagement, which is measured by comments, likes, shares, retweets, etc." Facebook was particularly mentioned numerous times. For example: "For us, our story would be 'doing well' online if we were getting lots of 'likes,' comments or shares on our *Facebook* [our emphasis]."

But just like the editors who quantified the audience based on traffic, some definitions of "doing well" operationalized to refer to engagement in social media also referred to a quantified audience. An editor said a story did well "if it gets more than 500 likes on Facebook." Another said doing well meant a "story on Facebook has reached more than 3,000 people." In general, references to likes and shares as measures of engagement refer to when a story "goes viral" or creates "social media buzz." It appears that online editors associate engagement with sharing on social media, assuming that shares drive more traffic to the site. Sharing and liking are also associated with commenting. For example, an editor referred to instances when a story "has engaged our reader-base—it is shared by readers and commented by many."

The concept of engagement has introduced new currencies in the journalistic field. A "like"

has taken on a different meaning, something that has a tangible and quantifiable manifestation. The reader is no longer the culmination of dissemination, but also another platform for promotion. The goal is no longer confined to getting a reader to read a story, but also to get a reader to lead others to read the story, thereby becoming an agent for the newsroom to further increase traffic. For instance, an editor said:

> If our audience is reacting to the content—AND SHARING IT—then we consider that story to be "doing well." We want the user to read the content, of course. And our site allows for plenty of that. But what do they do after consuming it? If they just go away, then it's not the optimal experience as we would rather them be moved to share that content with their friends/family on social networks. That's the true sign of a story "doing well" ... when the user becomes an avenue for further traffic and interaction [emphasis in original].

4.4. Conversations

Though web analytics and social media provide quantifiable measures of engagement, other editors focused on other qualitative measures of engagement, such as generating conversations and provoking debates. For example, an editor said: "A story that does well is a story which adds to and drives the conversation." Another editor also said: "A story is 'doing well' if it attracts a significant audience, significant social sharing, and *provokes a conversation* in the larger media environment [our emphasis]." These conversations, as defined by the online editors, can be categorized into two main types: conversations among readers; and conversations between readers and journalists.

First, editors referred to conversations between readers. Some editors said a story did well if it motivated readers to comment about the story and discuss it among themselves, usually in the website's comments box, or on social media. For example, one editor said: "Whenever we have people fighting on a Facebook post, we generally feel the story is doing well." Others referred to "generating comments and discussion" or "generating conversation in the comments section." An editor referred to web analytics as an important measure of a story's performance, but still prioritized the comments a story generates, qualifying, however, that this perception has to do with the small size of the news organization:

> With the size of our paper and readership, a story doing well has less to do with the number of hits or views it receives and more to do with the conversation that readers spark in the comments of the article and any links that were posted to social media We do monitor the analytics, but our primary indicator of a story's success is in the quantity and quality of the comments it generates.

Second, some online editors also referred to conversations between the newsroom and its readers. In basic terms, a story that does well is one that "gets feedback." One editor simply responded to the survey question by saying: "When we get phone calls about it!" This is reminiscent of the traditional ways journalists got audience feedback in the pre-internet era (Gans 1979, Schlesinger 1978). Another editor also focused on audience feedback, but also acknowledged the new ways the audience can communicate with journalists. The editor said a story that did well got "feedback from readers in terms of emails, re-tweets, comments on Facebook, phone calls, one on one conversations." In this group of responses, some editors clearly refer to audience involvement, a concept similar to audience engagement, but measured in a very different way.

4.5. Journalistic Values

For a handful of online editors—a minority, but enough to demonstrate contrast with the dominant themes above—a story "doing well" was one that served a function beyond finding an immediate commercial audience. These editors linked "doing well" with journalism's watchdog and monitorial functions. In so doing, they focused on the journalism itself and the values it represented (when done right) rather than the audience it attracted. For example, one editor articulated the value of "a well-researched, well-written story [that] resonates with the community, draws the attention of a large segment of our audience, is shared on social media, and sometimes initiates some kind of change in the community." While issues of delivery and audience are certainly present here, the editor foregrounds the quality of the story itself, and returns to this theme in the final clause by suggesting that high quality journalism is a steward of the community it serves, where the lives of citizens are bettered by journalistic excellence. Another editor touched upon the importance of traffic, engagement, and sharing, but returned to the community theme. For this editor, doing well meant providing the checking value against powerful interests that normative conceptions of journalism's role frequently articulate (Blasi 1977)—adhering to journalism's watchdog role:

> Generally when we say something is "doing well" online, we mean users are engaging with the content. This can be tracked through page views, shares and online comments, but also through buzz and reaction in the community. If a crooked city manager is fired after a series of stories exposing him, I would say that story "did well."

This was manifested in subtler ways, too. Some editors phrased their responses in particular ways that stressed certain aspects over others. For example: "A story is doing well *if it is an important story* that is generating a lot of traffic and comments" [our emphasis]. This editor recognized that finding an audience was important. However, placing the story first places a subtle but noticeable emphasis on the journalism *itself* over the audience it garners. For another editor, doing well meant "getting the information right and posted online in a timely manner with a follow up in print for the next day." For this editor, traditional journalistic values of accuracy and timeliness were more fundamental than the platform upon which the information was disseminated.

What is notable about these responses is their infrequency and the way they foreground the actual journalism; in market terms, they articulate the value of the "product" rather than the audience it finds. This was true even of responses that began with an emphasis on the audience, such as the respondent who defined doing well as gaining a "good return audience, slowly building number of viewers, [and] providing excellent content." That this last clause was so rare in the data was striking, as it indicates that the imperative of crafting good content—the creation of excellent journalism—seemed to play a secondary role to the imperative of crafting content that could find a commercial audience. As Baker (2002, 191) noted, journalism has "significant positive externalities—that is, benefits to people other than the immediate consumer of the product." However, the vast majority of the editors defined "doing well" in techno-centric language using market logic.

5. Synthesis

The above categories of definitions of "doing well" are not always exclusive, and in several instances, editors would include multiple definitions in their responses. These responses, however, also provided insights into how these editors prioritized the different ways they conceptualize what makes a story successful. Traffic based on web analytics and social media engagement metrics—both quantifiable measures—are the most frequently invoked measures of doing well. For example, one editor said: "Pageviews are the primary measure. Likes, shares, etc., are a secondary measure." Another editor referred to specific programs as arbiters of what it means for a story to do well: "Doing well online means the story is showing up on the first screen in *Chartbeat* [a web analytics program], being talked about or share on *Twitter* and *Facebook* [our emphasis]."

In general, what the categories that emerged from the analysis showed is an emerging standard in defining a successful news story that is largely traffic-oriented. The availability and use of new audience information technologies, particularly web analytics and social media, have shaped how journalists define what "doing well" means. Their responses showed how web analytics and social media jargon—such as likes, shares, hits, page views, and uniques—has permeated journalistic discourse. But even among editors who equated doing well with

ultimately drawing traffic, there was no consensus on which metric is the most important, indicating a field still in the process of searching for useful and meaningful standards amid the frenzy brought about by new technologies able to collect, store, and analyze a wealth of audience data.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how online journalists define a phrase that has become a staple in newsrooms discourses: "doing well." By asking online editors to define the phrase, and analyzing their responses, this study found five general categories of definition. Stories are considered to be "doing well" if: a) they are getting a lot of readership; b) they are getting a lot of clicks; c) they are being shared on social media; d) people are talking about them; or e) they contribute to journalism's social functions. Traffic-oriented definitions are most common. There were a lot of references to getting high traffic based on web analytics, and getting a lot of likes and shares on social media that drive more eyeballs to the website. The online editors' use of analytics parlance in their responses indicates not only adoption of web analytics, but also the technology's impact on journalistic standards and routines.

Those who grounded their responses in journalism's core social functions comprised the minority. The overwhelming majority provided traffic-oriented definitions, aided by what they know from web analytics and social media. Their definitions referred to quantifiable and easily understood metrics, measuring journalistic performance by quantitative indicators of audience size. This is reminiscent of what provoked a focus on content as a determinant of journalistic performance in the 1960s—intense competition (Rosenberry 2005). But this time, the focus is not on content alone, but on the size of audience it can gather. This is motivated by intense competition for eyeballs and revenues, itself motivated by the need to survive, especially during a period that is very uncertain for journalism (Lowrey and Woo 2010).

Measuring quality by marketplace performance (broadly defined) is, of course, not a new concept. This notion, underpinned by an understanding of audiences as rational actors capable of sifting through the "bad" to find the "good," is the basic epistemological premise of the marketplace of ideas and free market economics. Here, quality is conflated with commercial appeal—operationalized by many of these editors as clicks, likes, retweets, shares, and so on. Nor it is novel for journalists to consider audience size. Broadcast news ratings and newspaper circulation rates matter because journalists have acknowledged the importance of audience size even in the past. But giving in to what audiences wanted used to be largely a form of guesswork—at most what journalists could do was compare today's newspaper issue sales with yesterday's. Learning about whether audiences liked a newspaper edition or a news program's episode came after publication or airing. But in this age of web analytics and social media, journalists get audience metrics in real-time and can rearrange the website, replace stories, add more follow-ups to a story quickly in response to web analytics numbers. Stories get individual assessments, and editors can pit one news article against another based on audience numbers. These individual assessments might appear to be ordinary decisions, but guided by the same norm of prioritizing traffic—doing well—these individual decisions shape not only a newsroom's overall news coverage but also the kind of public discourse a collection of traffic-oriented stories will generate.

This explication of what journalists mean when they assess a journalistic output as "doing well" finds justification in the argument that such widespread practice can lead to prescriptiveness (Schudson 2001). Invoking the standard of "doing well," we argue, has become widespread, and can be considered a new descriptive norm in online journalism. It is likely that it is becoming an injunctive norm—something that soon will become expected of journalists, especially in organizations that are prioritizing online traffic in order to compete and survive. This descriptive norm—assessing journalistic outputs largely based on traffic—has the potential to influence behavior. Online journalists are writing click-bait headlines, uploading stories about the recent celebrity scandals, adding info-graphics and photo-galleries. Such ability to influence behavior is what makes norms persist (Interis 2011, von Wright 1969). It is interesting to note, however, that the "doing well" standard runs counter to other traditional journalistic norms, such as privileging editorial autonomy and serving the watchdog role. How this emerging standard will play out along with these traditional norms will be an interesting and important investigation for future studies.

The problem of quantifiable, commercially based (or, in this instance, click-based) measures of quality is what they miss when they assume a taken-for-grantedness that sidelines other—admittedly more subjective and "messy"—assessments of quality. This is particularly true of journalism, which is an unusual social good that serves functions above and beyond its immediate audience (Authors, 2014). It is crucial that, in this period of experimentation where news organizations scramble for a business model that will help them survive, journalists do not lose sight of the functions and purposes of journalism in a democratic society. This is why examining existing as well as emerging norms that guide and shape news work is important. Web analytics provide easy parameters to measure performance, but is this the kind of measurement appropriate for an output as unusual and complex as news? Standards of news quality and journalistic performance, largely because of the wealth of information about the audience available to journalists through web analytics, are changing, and this study has demonstrated how online editors define what they constantly pursue—a story that is "doing well." The bigger, and much more complex, question is: Are these stories that are "doing well" doing journalism any good?

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