

6 MEASURING QUALITY BY JOURNALISTIC ACTIVITY

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The concept of quality involves providing value for the money or time expended by consumers to obtain and use a product or service. Its existence is a central factor in developing consumer trust and in creating consumer loyalty by making creating a product or service deemed to have higher quality and thus more value than those offered by competitors.

The quality concept is problematic when applied to journalism because it is nearly impossible to articulate what elements makes up the concept. As a result, quality tends to be defined not by its presence but its absence and observers are in the position of saying “we can’t define good quality, but we know bad quality when we see it.”

6.1 Difficulties in Defining Quality

Difficulties in defining quality are especially problematic because the issue of the quality of journalism is not merely a question of increasing the value of a product to consumers. Rather, quality is a central element in achieving the social, political, and cultural goals asserted for journalism in democratic societies.

Although statements of journalism professionalism typically attempt to assert values such as truth, fairness, and completeness, they typically gravitated toward codes of conduct describing behaviours in which good journalists or those practising quality journalism such not engage and for which profession approbation is appropriate (Bertrand, 2000).

This problem of describing good or quality journalism is especially problematic if observers want to evaluate or compare journalistic quality or if media managers want to make efforts to improve.

It has been argued that quality in media results from competition and that in highly competitive conditions some media managers choose to increase spending on content as a means of improving content quality and its attractiveness to audiences (Lacy, 1992).

In business settings, contemporary discussions of quality have focused on efforts to implement total quality management (TQM) in manufacturing and service firms. The approach is founded on the idea of creating an organisational culture “based on the constant search of consumer satisfaction” (Saashkin and Kiser, 1993).

This culture is supported by establishing organisational processes designed to serve the goals of improving existing quality and preventing poor quality (Crosby, 1995). To be successful, attitudes and behaviour of management and employees must be focused to nurture collective and individual responsibility for achieving those goals

In the quality processes, a definition of quality based on measurable attributes is established and then performance in meeting those criteria is tracked. This might involve monitoring of the number of manufactured items rejected by inspectors for not meeting the criteria, the number of repairs required on products or the number of customer complaints.

The International Organisation for Standardisation has created a number of quality criteria for certain industries and processes. Most of these involve manufacturing firms and the closest that the standards come to communication involve criteria of printing quality, optical characters, inks, and printing equipment (ISO, 2000). But assessing journalistic quality is not the same as measuring tolerances in engine manufacturing, consistency of dose strength in pharmaceuticals, or colour registration in printing.

Nevertheless, this concept of stipulating quality attributes and measuring performance in meeting those attributes as part of process of continual improvement is intuitively appropriate for journalism and communications.

Sánchez-Taberero (1998) recently attempted to define quality for communications firms suggesting 10 characteristics of quality:

- Exclusivity or uniqueness

- Adaptation of content to durable human needs
- Company identity
- Precision, veracity and internal coherency in media product
- Pleasing content
- Originality, imagination and creativity
- Timeliness and temporal or emotional proximity
- Comprehensibility
- Attractive Presentation
- Physical base

6.2 Problems of Measuring Defined Journalistic Quality

Most of the definitions of quality asserted by observers of journalism present significant problems for anyone attempting to assess or improve quality.

If one takes the Sánchez-Tabernero list, for example, a number of these characteristics are problematic because measurability is difficult. How can one measure veracity, emotional proximity, and comprehensibility, for example?

If one focuses specifically on journalism the issues of intangibility of the product and the difficulty of measurement are problematic further compounded and one is forced to rely on surrogate measures for performance. Timeliness is often measured by how rapidly information reaches audiences. Accuracy is measured complaints by participants or similarity of the information to that provided by other sources.

But measuring completeness, breadth, truthfulness, reliability, or context is not possible or practical because no person is in a position of full knowledge in which to make such evaluations.

One can not even set a effective standard for the types of stories or new mix that make up quality because the standard would become invariable and the events and issues of coming days cannot be forecasted because no one can foretell the future.

Does this mean that it is impossible to gauge newspapers' efforts toward producing quality journalism? I believe that the answer is no. I believe

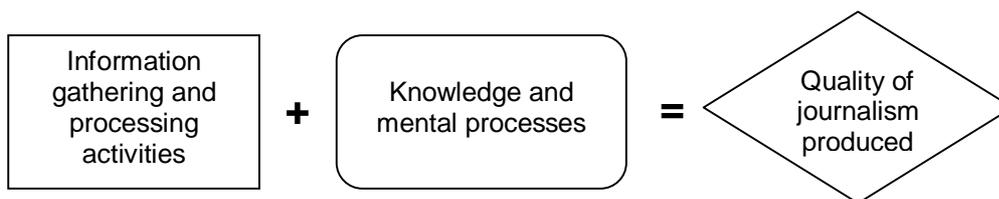
that one can begin to deal with such issues by evaluating journalistic work processes.

Journalism is not in itself a product or service. We do well, in my opinion, to consider it the mental activity of journalists that produces value in the forms of news, features, commentary, photos, and entertainment. It is also the mental activity that creates additional value by editing, drawing parallels between stories, creating layout, and employing design to enhance the communications.

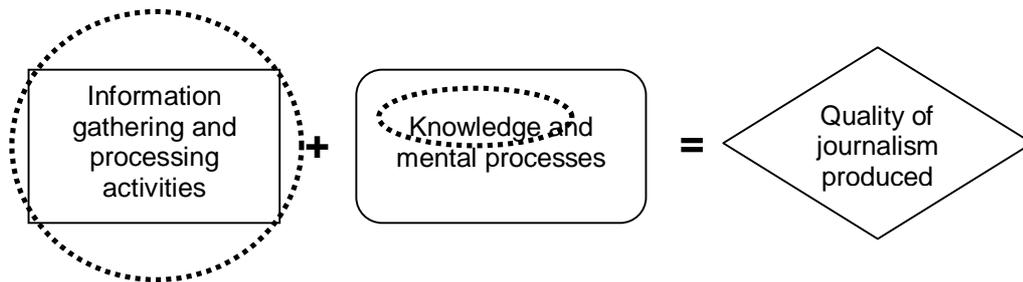
It is obviously impossible to measure this mental activity, but I believe it is possible to measure activities that make these mental activities possible and affect its quality. Thus one can produce surrogate measures of quality journalism. This occurs because journalism is not merely a function of the active brain. It results the brain processing information that is gathered for the purpose of creating journalism. When better information is obtained, and when more effort is placed into developing knowledge and understanding by the journalists, they can process the information better and produce higher quality journalism.

Thus, journalistic quality is a function of journalistic activity and because the activities that produce and process this information can be measured, these activities can be used as surrogate measures of journalistic quality. The assumptions of this approach are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Assumptions of This Approach



The entire range of activities in this equation can not be measured but I believe it is possible to assess the activities that make up major elements of the equation, particularly those involving time use and knowledge development activities (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Elements that can be Measured

6.3 Assessing Journalistic Quality by Activity

If activity is basis for journalistic quality, journalists who exhibit higher levels of activity gain the potential and understanding to produce materials of greater quality. Conversely, journalists who produce lower levels of activity lose the potential and understanding to produce materials of quality. Thus journalistic time use becomes a means of assessing quality because good time use increases activity and consequently quality. Poor time use on the other hand decreases activity and quality.

In previous work I have argued that seven major categories of journalistic activity can be measured and that time use assessments can be based on the activities:

- interviews
- telephone gathering of information, arranging interviews
- attending events about which stories are written
- attending staff meetings, discussions, and training
- reading to obtain background material and knowledge
- thinking, organising material, and waiting for information and materials
- Travelling to and from locations of where information is gathered (Picard, 1998).

That work, designed to help improve and manage productivity of journalists, creates the foundation for surrogate measures of journalistic quality through journalistic activity.

Concepts that are unmeasurable in themselves now become measurable through these surrogates. Concepts such as accuracy, completeness, breadth, and context result from journalistic activity.

Accuracy results from reportage built upon an understanding of events or issues. Thus, a higher number of interviews and greater time in information gathering produce more accurate journalism.

Completeness and breadth are produced by thoroughness and understanding. It is produced by a higher number of interviews, greater time in information gathering, personal attendance at events, more time expended for background reading, and time for thought during the preparation of the final journalistic product.

Similarly context for information is produced by those activities that contribute to journalists understanding, such as background reading and time for thought and preparation of the information.

The foremost problem for making such assessments is that it requires access to the newsrooms of newspapers, radio stations, television stations, and news services. News organisations must see the value of the process and become committed to it, either as an activity they permit researchers to conduct or a process that they undertake themselves.

If researchers conduct the process, measurement can be done through observation and recording of journalistic activity or through self-reporting mechanisms. In either case, the use of sampling certain weeks or days is required due to the temporal problems of conducting such research continually.

There is also an ugly possibility that the results could be used against some journalists and this often leads to reticence or outright opposition to the process by journalists and their labour organisations. These can be overcome by putting some protections are put into place and helping journalists see that the process also produces information that can improve the working life of journalists.

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