Measuring and interpreting productivity of journalists

by Robert G. Picard

This article explores the problems of using productivity measurements for individual and newsroom performance appraisals and suggests productivity can be measured through activities that contribute to journalistic quality.

As increased managerial emphasis and training has blossomed in the newspaper industry in the past two decades, a concurrent increase in attention to performance appraisals, personnel improvement programs, and employee productivity measurement has developed. These programs are used to enhance performance, weed out staff problems, establish mechanisms for rewards and improve company profitability.

The methods have helped remove some of the guesswork and raw politics from personnel evaluations, especially in larger organizations, and have been useful at establishing productivity benchmarks in many newspaper departments and across papers as a whole. But the efforts to improve productivity have underscored the difficulty of measuring journalistic productivity, and newsrooms remain one of the last newspaper departments where such measures are being introduced.

Some newspapers began crude efforts to measure productivity in newsrooms after the introduction of computers because they made it easy to track stories and inch counts. But journalists and editors are dissatisfied with what such mere accounting actually measures.
Journalism is a labor-intensive activity that involves the collection, analysis, restructuring and presentation of information. Because it is a creative and mental activity that requires the capacity of the human brain, print media require a large number of journalists to produce their products. This runs counter to the trends of increasing competition, rising costs and improved production through technologies that are forcing managers to use fewer journalists and to use them more efficiently.

Newspaper firms have increasingly been unable to recover rising costs of materials, labor and other resources by raising prices. As a result they must improve productivity to maintain or increase the profit margin on sales, a goal that can be achieved only if firms have productivity measurement systems in place.

Newspaper managers need to fully understand the impact of journalists on the economics of a newspaper company, what journalists do and how they go about their work, and what they can do to help journalists become more efficient in that work if their productivity is to be improved.

Some managers tend to think of journalists as merely costing them money in wages, benefits and expenses. There is no doubt that journalists are expensive, and good journalists - like good sailing ships - are very expensive to keep. Managers who focus merely on the cost of journalists, however, discount the contribution of journalists to the enterprise. The product is journalism, not printed paper. It is not merely the tangible newspaper but rather the mental activity of journalists in the form of news, features, commentary, photos and entertainment and the value added to that news and information by editing, drawing parallels between stories, layout, and design. Consequently, reducing journalistic workforces or increasing workload reduce the quality of material created and its value to readers.

For a newspaper manager to improve productivity in the newsrooms, he or she must combine understanding of the cost of journalists, the activities they undertake and their contribution to the product.

### Measuring productivity

There are several methods of measuring productivity. The simplest is calculating productivity as turnover per employee. Using this method, total turnover is divided by the number of full-time equivalent employees. This method provides a measure of the amount of revenue (turnover) produced by the labor of the average employee. An increase in productivity is shown when the amount rises; a decrease when the amount declines.

A 1997 study of the newspaper industry as a whole using this approach showed that although productivity appears to have increased strongly since the early 1980s, it actually declined since the mid-1980s and its recent increases have been only moderate.

![Figure 1: Newspaper industry productivity (measured by thousands of dollars of turnover per employee in current and constant dollars)](chart)

Although this type of analysis is useful for industry and even single-firm analysis, it lacks the precision of measuring productivity using value added per employee. The value-added measure is obtained by subtracting the costs of materials from total revenue and then dividing by the number of employees. Because such information is available within companies, managers can use this better measurement.

This type of data is useful in strategic planning by firms and other interested parties. A manager using this type of data can review the perfor-
mance of a single firm or department over time or compare the performance of one firm with other firms to determine which is more effective.

Similarly, one can analyze the efficiency of journalists in economic terms by measuring value added per journalistic employee. One can choose to use either total revenues or only total circulation revenues in calculating the value added.

Value-added analysis can also be combined with profitability analysis to gain a very powerful tool for engineering productivity and profitability, as has been shown in an application of this method regarding the graphic arts industry in general. It is especially important for analyzing the effects of changing the number of personnel or changing their costs. Managers can use this type of data to learn when increasing or decreasing the number of journalists will be financially harmful to a firm. Journalists' organizations and unions can use this type of analysis to determine the impact of changes in labor wages or benefits on the industry.

Significant limitations of these two types of total productivity analysis, however, are that the results may be affected by changes in revenues and costs outside of the control of the manager and that only the number of employees is directly controllable.

Another problem with these measures of overall productivity is that they do not provide means of analyzing productivity of individual journalists. Measures of overall productivity do not tell which journalists are most or least productive, do not tell which journalists are most or least efficient in their work, do not tell which journalists producing the best or least quality work and do not tell which journalists are contributing most or least to the company.

**Output production by journalists**

There are means that managers can use in solving these problems of measuring productivity. Managers can conduct their own measurement and analyze its meaning within their own organizations and departments.

The simplest and easiest involves tracking production output, i.e., the work completed by journalists. Such measurements can be taken each day, each week, each month, each quarter, or each year. The output of journalists is articles written, articles edited, photographs made, and pages laid out and designed. The amount of work completed in these areas can be measured numerically, because most work is completed using a computer system and files and work is identified by the journalist who completed the task.

Specific measures of journalistic output can include:

- the number of original articles written, the number of words in those articles and the column inches produced;
- the number of articles resulting from rewriting material from news and feature services, press releases, etc., the number of words in those articles and the column inches produced;
- the number of articles edited, the number of words in those articles and the column inches produced;
- the number of photographs taken or printed; and
- the number of pages designed or laid out.

This type of productivity measure can easily allow a manager to determine what the average production of a journalist in a firm is and then to look for unusually good or poor productivity among the staff.

These types of productivity measures by themselves are somewhat problematic, however, because of two primary problems with production output measurement:

First, different departments or specializations within a newspaper produce different levels of output even in the same company. And second, it does not provide any measure of the quality of the work done.

The first problem is not particularly serious, but it requires the manager analyzing the data to understand such differences when interpreting the data and determining how to react to it. A reporter producing an in-depth story will understandably not produce as many stories as a journalist writing shorts. An editor laying out the first metro page will not do so as quickly as an editor laying out a page of stocks where the format is already established. And an editorial writer will produce fewer column inches than a general assignment reporter.

The interpretation of productivity using output, then, must be based on comparing productivity among similar types of journalists or the same journalist over time.

The second problem presents far more difficult issues. As critics of simplistic counting of bylines and inches correctly point out, the process promotes an increase in volume of copy but does not measure quality and may result in reduced quality of journalism.

Despite such problems, this type of shallow measurement and analysis is being found regularly in newsrooms, often because the ability to do so has been programmed into computer systems used by most newspapers. The use of mere output analysis is an outgrowth of the increased managerial emphasis within newspapers and the naive and inappropriate application of the scientific management approach to the newsroom. That approach, promoted by Frederick W. Taylor and his disciples in the first half of the 20th century, argued that performance quotas could be established for relatively unskilled, repetitive tasks such as those found on assembly lines and packing houses.
Journalistic activities and processes, however, are dissimilar because much of the work is unanticipated and it depends on the creation of material by skilled individuals. Robert Giles, editor and publisher of the Detroit News, has noted that within the newsroom “there is no orderly method of gathering and writing the news... The writing process is highly personal... The remarkable thing about this process is that it is at once thoughtful and punctual. Such is the concentration and discipline of mind that the assigned story arrives at the desk on time.”

The use of output as a means of measuring journalistic productivity, then, provides only rough indicators and its use must be limited by very careful interpretation that takes into account the differences among journalistic assignments and the realization that quality is not addressed by such numerical calculations.

**Measuring journalistic quality through activity**

When asked to define quality, many journalists find it difficult to define. As a result many observers are tempted to say there is no definition of journalistic quality but they know good or bad journalism when they see it. When this attitude is operationalized in management, it means that managers get to know their journalists who are unusually good or bad, but the rest of the personnel get lost in the middle.

By refusing to define or find ways to measure quality it becomes impossible to help analyze the average journalists and to develop means to improve their quality, efficiency, and productivity.

But it is possible to indirectly measure journalistic quality and productivity by thinking of them as the result of a variety of activities carried out by journalists. Instead of measuring only production output a manager needs to also measure the level of a journalist’s activity. By doing so, one can determine which journalists use their time efficiently and carry out activities that produce materials of depth and quality.

The rationale behind this analysis is that journalists who exhibit higher levels of activity gain the potential and understanding to produce materials of greater quality. Journalists who produce lower levels of activity lose the potential and understanding to produce materials of quality. Thus, the use of time by journalists is critical in assessing efficiency and quality. Good time use by journalists increases activity and consequently quality. Poor time use decreases activity and quality.

Seven categories of time use can be used to track the activity level of journalists. These include time spent:

1. **Conducting face-to-face and telephone interviews.**
   A primary means of collecting information is through interviews and discussions with primary sources of information. Thus, the number of interviews conducted provides an important activity indicator. The more interviews, the greater the productivity and the more likely stories are based in broader understanding, contain more viewpoints, and have other elements of quality.

2. **Making telephone calls for information, arranging meetings, etc.**
   The telephone allows journalists to more quickly gather information, arrange meetings, etc. But spending too much or too little time on the phone can be unproductive, so time use and time management involving telecommunications is an important productivity indicator.

3. **Attending conferences, seminars, meetings, events about which stories are written.**
   Getting out into the community to attend and cover activities is an important characteristic of quality and the number of activities attended is an indicator of productivity. It is also by getting to activities in the community that a journalist develops contacts that help with future stories and help provide the elements of quality to those stories.

4. **Attending staff meetings, discussions, and training conferences.**
   These types of activities can be both helpful and harmful to productivity. They can improve the output and quality of output, but if they occur too often or take too much time they can harm output.

5. **Reading newspapers, professional magazines, reference materials, and other background information.**
   Journalists are often denigrated for writing well but not knowing what they are writing about, so it is incumbent upon journalists to be informed about the issues they cover and which appear on the beats to which they are assigned. Thus, all journalists need to devote an appropriate amount of time studying the issues and topics that they encounter. Doing so improves not only the quality of stories but also productivity when writing about a subject because less time must be spent breaking away from writing to try to verify understanding of the story.
6. Thinking, organizing, and waiting for information and returned phone calls.

This "downtime" between collecting information and writing stories is important if it is used efficiently to think about the stories underway and to organize notes and materials. But these times are also ones in which there is great potential for inefficiency. Thus, tracking and understanding the amount of time spent in these activities provides an important indicator for both journalists and managers in gauging time use.

7. Traveling to and from locations for information for stories, to take photographs, and other work related purposes.

Traveling between locations is inherent in the process of news coverage and the amount of time spent in this activity is an important indicator to management about the efficiency of its assignments and work locations.

In considering these factors, newsroom managers can adopt methods of time reporting used in other professions or crafts, or develop specific methods for themselves. One could ask staff to regularly record the amount of time spent doing these activities using a reporting form or one adapted for a specific paper or department. The form can be filled in throughout the day and then summarized at the end of the day. There is no reason that this type of reporting should be done constantly, but at a minimum it could done for a week at a time at least 4 times a year. Once a month would seem optimal. Reporting in five-minute blocks of time would give sufficient precision for the uses of this type of data.

All who have worked in newsrooms know a reporter or editor cannot stop every five minutes to record activity, but employees can take a minute or two every hour or two to make a record of their time use on the limited number of work days it is requested. A simple and well-designed time reporting instrument can speed the process and make it less burdensome than the process might at first seem to some observers. Most activities will far exceed the 5-minute time blocks (actual writing time may be a couple of hours for a single story, for example). The reason for the use of the smaller time block is to adequately account for shorter time uses such as phone calls, discussions with editors, etc. An example of a completed form using 5 minute time blocks is seen in Figure 2.

By combining this activity/quality data with output data, a manager can then use this data to determine which journalists, editors, etc. contribute most/least/average. This would be done by analyzing what activity characteristics are found among the most active journalists. The manager can teach less productive journalists techniques to develop and improve activity and quality levels.


Figure 2: Sample completed time log, continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On the Road (from-to)</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Paper-City Hall</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. City Hall-Paper</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Paper-Fire Scene</td>
<td>15 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Fire Scene-Paper</td>
<td>15 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>50 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing, Editing, Laying Out/Designing Pages</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Redevelopment Story</td>
<td>1 hr. 30 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fire Story</td>
<td>45 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>2 hr. 15 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Telephone Interviews or Calls for Information, Arranging Meetings, etc.</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Councilmember Jarrett</td>
<td>10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Planner's Office</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfaith Council</td>
<td>5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott Parks</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everett Sloan</td>
<td>5 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30 min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thinking, Organizing and Waiting for Information or Returned Phone Calls</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Reference Materials, Background Information, Newspapers, etc.</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Looking up material in morgue</td>
<td>10 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading background clips and materials</td>
<td>20 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>30 min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, however, how the data are interpreted is important. A journalist working on the police beat would be expected to produce a different pattern of activity on the indicators and different levels of output than a reporter assigned to an investigative reporting team. A journalist for a lifestyle section might be expected to show similarities in activity and output to that of a writer for the food section, but both would be expected to be different from a reporter assigned to the city hall beat. Thus, when making comparisons or establishing benchmarks, managers must take into account such differences. If they do so, they have a powerful and useful method for assessing productivity.

If differences are not taken into account and measures are unfairly applied, or if productivity measures are used primarily for punitive purposes rather than for the benefits of journalists, managers, and the paper combined, they can be expected to meet with resistance from journalists and labor organizations. Thus, how managers interpret and use the data is crucial in making it useful.

In addition to using such measures to track productivity among journalists, managers can also use the levels of activity to look for changes in the patterns of individual journalists over time. A decline in activity by formerly active journalists may indicate they are suffering from stress, depression, burnout or some other difficulty and the manager can respond to try to help improve their situations.

**Improving productivity by other means**

The productivity measures discussed above are important because they provide managers a means of assessing the current state of productivity or reviewing productivity trends. These measures are useful, but it must be understood that productivity using any measure does not result merely from the actions and efficiencies of journalists. Management decisions themselves affect productivity.

For example, managers' decisions to invest in computerization of the newsroom and digitalization of photo labs have increased productivity, but the benefits of these technologies cannot be hoped to produce significantly more productivity in the near term.

Management decisions can also cause of loss of productivity. If, for instance, the newsroom staff is cut significantly, journalists may spend too much time on traveling between stories to be able to produce the number, size, or quality of stories previously produced. Similarly, if the workload is unevenly distributed among employees, overall productivity will fall.

Decisions regarding communications can also affect productivity. If journalists are spending significant amounts of time inefficiently waiting for phone calls, etc., their productivity may be increased by providing cellular phones or other communications devices so they may be contacted in the field.
while covering events, thus reducing the games of phone tag that often take place between journalists and sources.

Because travel time is a killer of productivity, managers need to carefully monitor travel time for travel-related productivity when making daily assignments. Similarly, it is useful in determining whether the development of bureaus or permitting journalists to work from home may be effective in improving productivity.

The development of reporting and editing teams is another important means of increasing both output and quality. By establishing teams that can produce joint work as well as their individual assignments, managers can use smaller blocks of time, often downtime, from several journalists, photographers and editors to produce materials that would have taken individuals a great amount of time or would have required additional staffing if handled as individual assignments.

It is also axiomatic that happy workers typically result in more productivity. Many managers understand that creating a work environment in which newspaper employees feel appreciated, satisfied with their opportunities, and that they appropriately share in the fruits of their labor will help increase productivity. This simple formula is lost on many managers, however, who view news workers as needing to be controlled by a strong - and often not too subtle - hand and not needing or worthy of rewards.

Summary

This article has attempted to show that journalistic productivity is not a simple matter of increasing traditional output measures (number of stories or lines produced) but that it is a complicated process that involves increasing the activities that go into producing quality journalism.

Productivity is not merely something that a manager measures but something that a manager fosters by using measurements to find efficiencies and develop support for increasing activity, output, and quality. Productivity is not the result of pressuring journalists. In fact, such pressures often produce stress, burnout, and lower productivity. Productivity is rather the result of a work environment in which journalists and managers believe their efforts contribute to a quality product out of pride and desire and who are willing to review their own performance to find efficiencies that will help them achieve productivity goals.

The time use assessment here is an improvement on mere output measurement that is used in a number of papers. But the usefulness of this assessment model depends upon the attitude of managers that employ it. If managers have good relations with their employees and use it as a means of individual and organizational improvement that can lead to performance rewards for employees, it will more likely be seen as a useful exercise for those who work in the newsroom. If relations are strained, if it is used as a punitive tool, if it is applied unfairly, managers will understandably experience worker resistance.

Simple measurement, however, is not the answer to improved productivity. As this article has shown productivity is not merely a matter of what the employees do but is also related to the ways managers organize, manage and interact with their workers. The assessment introduced here helps identify issues involving both employee and managerial decisions that make it possible to reassess operations in a way designed to improve overall productivity.

This ultimately leads to the question whether this method is worth the time. Persons who have used the daily time log have generally completed the form in no more than 5-10. If the form were used for four weeks over the course of the year its use would account for 1.5 to 3.25 hours of time. Some readers will see this as wasted time, as taking away from writing and producing the paper. The more enlightened manager, however, will see it as an investment in which better time utilization is promoted that can be used to produce many more hours of productive labor without increasing expenses.

Few have work habits that are so perfect that they cannot benefit from time use assessments. Even if a newspaper chooses not to employ a regular productivity-through-activity assessment as suggested by this paper, it may find an occasional employment of the instrument useful to help employees and managers self-identify time management problems.

Notes

3. For discussions of productivity measurement and management see Robert O. Brinkerhoff and Dennis E. Dressler, Productivity Measurement: A Guide for Managers and Evaluators. London: Sage, 1990 and Joseph Prokopenko, Productivity...
Role perception as predictor of editors' job satisfaction

by Roya Akhavan-Majid

This survey of newspaper editors finds those who see their roles as disseminators or interpreters more satisfied than those who see their role as adversary or watchdog.

One of the main attractions of the profession to aspiring journalists has been the glamour associated with the ability to influence the course of events in their community through informing the public debate on vital matters of social and economic policy, keeping a check on the government, exposing political corruption and helping to advance a progressive social agenda. Despite the primacy of the profit motive to many owners of the press, the individual editors and journalists who engage in this less-than-lucrative profession tend to still be driven, in many cases, by the grand vision of journalism's influential role in shaping public life.

Previous studies of American journalists have confirmed these observations. Public service - the chance to help people - was reported by John Johnstone, Edward Slawski, and William Bowman as being the top-rated factor by journalists among a list of items pertinent to judging jobs in journalism. Pay and fringe benefits, while viewed as important, were at the bottom of the list. More recent studies by David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit have borne out these findings, with minor modifications.

It is also clear from previous research that journalists seek to make their impact on society in a variety of ways. Depending on their professional values, journalists may seek to contribute to society as disseminators of timely and objective information, or in more active roles, as watchdogs, critics and agents of policy formation.

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