sociological science

Clickbait Crime News? Metrics and Professional Authority in Local Newsrooms

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Abstract: Existing research on newsroom metrics documents how journalists construct compatibility between discordant professional and commercial evaluation frameworks. This study examines the underexplored case where metrics validate existing practices. Drawing on interviews with 58 crime journalists in 40 U.S. newsrooms, I find that reporters whose work consistently performed well on audience metrics often defended professional evaluation criteria. Editors facilitated this defense through brokerage, absorbing commercial logics so reporters could experience their work as professionally guided. Market position structured interpretive responses: reporters could avoid metrics, override them, selectively appropriate them, or integrate them into practice. The transition from pageview to subscription regimes reshaped whether concordance was experienced as contaminating or legitimating. Even under concordance, journalists defended professional evaluation criteria.

Keywords: metrics; quantification; professions; journalism; crime news; criminal justice

Research on audience metrics in newsrooms has examined how journalists manage the tension between discordant professional judgment and commercial evaluation frameworks. Across organizational contexts, a consistent finding is that compatibility between metrics and professional values must be constructed through relational, organizational, and interpretive work (Christin 2020; Christin and Petre 2020; Petre 2021). Such work often focuses on settings where metrics and professional judgment prioritize divergent practices or outcomes. Less attention has been paid to cases where professionals succeed on quantitative evaluations without orienting toward them. Crime journalists in this study described their coverage as consistently ranking highest on audience metrics in local newsrooms, often without deliberate effort. How do professionals interpret and respond to metrics that confirm their preferred workplace practices?

Drawing on interviews with 58 journalists in 40 U.S. newsrooms, I find that many crime reporters actively maintained the separation between professional and commercial evaluative logics even when metrics validated their work. Reporters often defended professional evaluation criteria, treating metrics as an alternative framework whose authority threatened professional judgment. This finding reframes the relationship between quantification and professional autonomy. When professional and commercial logics produce concordant assessments of which work is valuable, competition shifts from the level of practical outcomes to the level of evaluative authority.

Reporters' orientations toward metrics were shaped by biographical experience. Many had witnessed or endured punitive pageview regimes earlier in their careers-regimes that tied compensation to clicks, damaged newsroom morale, and pushed

Citation: Ben-Menachem, Jonathan. 2026. "Clickbait Crime News? Metrics and Professional Authority in Local Newsrooms" Sociological Science 13: 685-711.

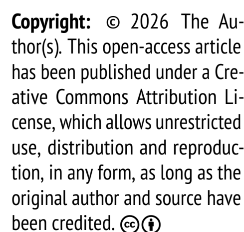
Received: March 11, 2026

Accepted: May 5, 2026

Published: June 22, 2026

Editor(s): Ari Adut, Kieran Healy

DOI: 10.15195/v13.a27



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colleagues out of the profession. The professional culture of metrics resistance that formed under those conditions persisted even after newsrooms shifted to subscription models that validated reporters' preferred practices.

These strategies were not uniformly available. Market position structured the repertoire: reporters whose beats reliably performed well on metrics could avoid quantitative evaluation, override it for individual stories, or selectively appropriate favorable numbers as rhetorical ammunition. The transition from pageview-based to subscription-based metrics regimes further reshaped this dynamic. Pageview concordance was symbolically contaminating—reporters succeeded on a metric their professional culture held in contempt. By contrast, subscription concordance was legitimating, rewarding the depth and exclusivity reporters already valued.

The findings contribute to research on quantification and professional autonomy by examining settings where commercial and professional logics each justify existing practice. These dynamics shaped the content of crime news: reporters who could override metrics continued covering jails despite low audience interest, although the elimination of incremental coverage went largely uncontested. If crime news shapes public attitudes toward punishment (Enns 2016; Duxbury 2023), the evaluative frameworks governing newsroom decisions will carry consequences beyond the newsroom.

Conceptual Framework

Quantification and Professional Evaluative Authority

Journalists differ from other professionals in that they do not establish jurisdiction through mastery of abstract knowledge (Abbott 1988). Instead, journalists establish credibility through immediacy and verification (Carlson 2017; Usher 2018; Anderson and Schudson 2019). Professionalization in the 20th century centered on journalistic objectivity, a set of practices that distinguished journalism from public relations (Tuchman 1972). Journalists prided themselves on independence from commercial influence, symbolized by the "firewall" physically separating editorial and business staff (Schudson 1978; Westlund and Ekström 2019). Editors exercised authority over judgments of audience interest, relying on peer norms and intuition while rejecting market research (Gans 1980; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1987; Schultz 2007).

Digitization disrupted this paradigm. Declining print revenue coincided with a flood of real-time audience data, collapsing daily publishing rhythms into continuous deadlines (Anderson 2011; Usher 2018). Pageview dashboards and quotas introduced a rival evaluation principle into newsrooms. Metrics made audience behavior visible, comparable, and actionable (Espeland and Stevens 2008), encouraging "grinding"—producing large volumes of low-effort content at the expense of stories reporters valued (Petre 2021). Metrics also disrupted professional hierarchies within newsrooms. Editors initially guarded metrics data, worried it might empower reporters to challenge their authority (Anderson 2011; Petre 2021). Yet, metrics were also mobilized as managerial tools of discipline: editors strategically disseminated audience data, praised reporters whose stories performed well, and promoted compliant journalists into positions of influence (Bunce 2019).

At the same time, reporters could draw on metrics as a resource to defend their professional judgment (Petre 2021).

Journalists' responses to metrics varied with organizational context and national setting. In a professionalized and hierarchical New York newsroom, reporters dismissed click-based evaluation while maintaining editorial criteria; in a less hierarchical Parisian newsroom with weaker division of labor, metrics were interpreted as an impressionistic signal of a writer's relevance in the public sphere (Christin 2020). Journalists applied moral distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate uses of audience data, cultivating a sense of control over their work through boundary work that distinguished "clean" from "dirty" metrics (Petre 2021). Journalists also performed relational work to construct compatibility between metrics and professional values—reframing audience data as democratic feedback or as organizational subsidies for ambitious reporting (Christin and Petre 2020). Heterogeneity in metrics implementation thus yielded heterogeneity in interpretation (Tandoc and Ferrucci 2017).

These accounts describe a shared dynamic wherein metrics and professional judgment reward or punish different practices. Less attention has been paid to cases where the numbers validate what professionals were already doing. Under such conditions, professionals face no structural pressure to change practices, and acceptance of metrics would cost them nothing. Abbott (1988) established that professional authority rests on jurisdiction over tasks; yet, professional authority also operates over the evaluative criteria by which task performance is assessed (Lamont 2012). Metrics that validate professional practice represent an alternative evaluative framework that, if accepted, would render professional judgment redundant. It is this concordance at the level of outcomes, combined with competition at the level of justification, that makes the case analytically productive.

Editorial Brokerage

If professionals defend evaluative authority at the individual level, the organizational conditions for that defense are maintained by middle managers. In newsrooms, editors are positioned between corporate leadership and reporters, responsible for ensuring that their desks meet quantitative targets while preserving the professional norms that motivate reporters' work. This structural position makes editors brokers: actors who reconcile competing logics and generate locally workable arrangements (Obstfeld 2005; Kellogg 2014). Classic accounts of brokerage emphasize the linking of disconnected domains (Gould 1989; Burt 2007), but more recent treatments foreground how brokers reframe organizational directives and construct interpretations that make conflicting demands actionable (Kellogg 2014). Middle managers are particularly well positioned to translate top-down imperatives into terms that align with occupational norms (Balogun 2003).

When professional and commercial logics produce concordant outcomes, brokerage takes on a distinct character. Editors are not resolving practical conflicts between what metrics demand and what professional judgment dictates—crime reporters are already doing what the numbers reward. Instead, editors maintain the appearance of professional autonomy by ensuring that reporters experience their work as

guided by editorial judgment rather than commercial logic, discussing coverage priorities in professional terms so that reporters need not confront the commercial logic operating in parallel. This is organizational work in the service of evaluative separation. When a beat reliably meets quantitative targets, reporters enjoy what I call *insulation* from metrics regimes: their market performance shields them from the disciplinary consequences of quantitative evaluation, allowing editors to treat metrics as incidental confirmation rather than as a basis for directive intervention. When market performance falters or when metrics motivate newsroom-wide decisions that cannot be reframed—such as the elimination of beats or categories of coverage—brokerage breaks down, the evaluative separation that editors have maintained is ruptured, and reporters must confront commercial logic directly.

Interpretive Strategies

When brokerage succeeds, reporters can sustain professional authority without directly engaging commercial logics. But reporters are not passive beneficiaries of organizational mediation—they actively interpret and negotiate metrics in daily practice. Drawing on research on boundary work and occupational sensemaking (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Petre 2021), I conceptualize these efforts as *interpretive strategies*: patterned ways professionals manage the relationship between concordant evaluative logics while preserving their authority over the criteria by which their work is assessed.

Market position structures the repertoire of available strategies. Reporters whose beats reliably perform well on metrics can afford to avoid quantitative evaluation altogether—no one forces the issue. They can override weak metrics for individual stories if their overall performance provides a sufficient cushion. They can appropriate metrics selectively, drawing on favorable numbers when useful and ignoring them otherwise. Even cooptation (Andersson and Liff 2018)—the genuine integration of metrics into professional practice—is easier to defend to skeptical peers when it can be framed as a choice rather than a concession. Reporters on beats with weaker market performance likely face a narrower repertoire: avoidance becomes unsustainable when individual reporters or news desks fail to meet organizational quotas.

Crime Journalism as an Empirical Case

Crime journalism provides a productive case for examining how professionals maintain evaluative authority. Crime news has occupied a central position in local news markets since the penny press era (Schudson 1978). Even after professionalization reshaped the industry around norms of objectivity and public service, crime remained a staple of local coverage—valued by editors for its reliable supply, low production costs, and consistent audience interest (Fishman 1980; Ericson et al. 1987; Chermak 1995). This longstanding market position meant that crime desks entered the digital era with a structural advantage.

This advantage has made crime reporting a frequent subject of market-based explanations for news content. The adage "if it bleeds, it leads" (Hoyt 1989) is typically read as a claim about commercial imperatives shaping editorial practice.

Critics have extended this logic to the digital era, arguing that metrics incentivize sensationalist crime coverage (Chappell and Rispoli 2020; Usher 2021). International research documents increased crime coverage under digitization in France and Germany, attributing the trend to audience interest and newsroom competition (Ruffio and Hubé 2022). From this perspective, crime journalism represents a most—likely case for commercial distortion—if metrics discipline any beat, it should be this one. The transition from pageview-based to subscription-based metrics regimes, which accelerated across the U.S. news industry between 2015 and 2020 (Mele, Skibinski, and Spector 2019), provides additional analytical variation, as reporters in this study experienced both regimes and could reflect on how each shaped their relationship to audience data. The sections that follow describe the study's design and present the findings.

Data and Methods

Design and Recruitment

This article is part of a broader effort to learn about local U.S. crime news work. The target population consists of reporters and editors working in local print newsrooms in the most populous U.S. cities. I excluded most journalists who work in publications with low levels of professionalization or particularly partisan readerships because I believed that mainstream news organizations would have more influence on readers' attitudes or policy preferences. Public opinion shifts following the George Floyd uprising were bifurcated by partisan media consumption (Reny and Newman 2021). Accordingly, I selected organizations with nominally bipartisan readerships that report new information about local criminal justice practices. Although this case selection strategy did not consider metrics, it does hold implications for the present study. Relative to print-only or hybrid print-digital news workers, journalists in online-only newsrooms are more likely to make use of engagement data, report awareness of newsroom digital strategy, and incorporate metrics in routines (Whipple and Shermak 2018).

My recruitment strategy involves "sampling for range" (Weiss 1995; Small 2009), or "finding a variety of participants who are well positioned to reveal the practices, mechanisms, and relationships your research seeks to explain" (Gerson and Damaske 2020, p.46). I recruited from mainstream daily metropolitan newspapers in the largest U.S. metro areas. To find potential participants, I conducted searches of recent articles published in those papers (using keywords like "crime," "police," "shooting") and identified reporters via their bylines. Some newspapers also have up-to-date staff directories.

I contacted 229 journalists in 62 newsrooms and interviewed 58 of them (25 percent response rate). I was previously acquainted with nine participants before I attempted to recruit them. Participants work in 40 newsrooms across 24 U.S. states. Journalists also discussed their work experiences in prior newsrooms. Because reporters working different beats could have different interpretations or uses of metrics, exposure to all positions was necessary. I interviewed ten breaking news reporters, ten court reporters, twelve public safety or criminal justice reporters, six

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants ($n = 48$).

Variable	Mean
Age in years	35.00
Years in journalism	13.27
Years in crime journalism	9.56
Race (proportion)	
Asian (East)	0.02
Asian (South)	0.02
Black/African American	0.02
Hispanic/Latino	0.12
Native American/Alaska Native	0.02
White	0.88
Gender (proportion)	
Man	0.44
Non-binary	0.04
Woman	0.52
Education (proportion)	
High school	0.02
Associate's degree	0.02
Bachelor's degree	0.73
Master's degree	0.23
Sexuality (proportion)	
Bisexual/pansexual	0.12
Gay	0.02
Lesbian	0.04
Straight	0.81

investigative reporters, ten police reporters, and ten editors. (These groups reflect analytic choices; e.g., I categorized a "staff writer" as a "criminal justice reporter.") Several journalists had worked in multiple relevant positions—this breakdown only indicates the position they held at the time of the interview.

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of participants. A total of 48 out of 58 completed the survey. Respondents could choose more than one racial/ethnic, gender identity, or sexuality descriptor. I did not incorporate these data into my recruitment strategy. Survey data suggest that the majority of crime journalists are men (53 percent) and white (77 percent), although these data include television news outlets (Tomasik and Gottfried 2023). Participant characteristics are fairly similar to national estimates (my sample skews slightly younger). Interviews lasted 1.68 h on average and ranged from 45 min to three hours long. I conducted interviews between 2022 and 2024. Interviews were conducted via video call, save for one in-person interview in a newsroom. I recorded each interview and transcribed each recording in full. All quotes in this study were recorded verbatim, and the use of brackets indicates where I have edited informants' comments in order to reduce identifiability or improve brevity or clarity. Participants were not permitted to read or comment on drafts of this article.

This study was approved and deemed exempt by my university's Institutional Review Board. It was necessary to negotiate confidentiality with most participants before they agreed to an interview. The target population is small, and informants could be identified by their peers. I promised that I would not name them or their organizations. I have used pseudonyms and removed the names of most locations and organizations. Because of these confidentiality agreements, I cannot share my interview data, but I can share my recruitment outreach template, interview guides, and code list (Online supplement).

With respect to positionality, my data could, in theory, be influenced by my reputation. I have published criminal justice reform advocacy and media criticism articles in the past. It is possible that potential participants who were strangers at first contact looked me up and declined to participate as a result. Even among those who agreed to participate, it is possible that their testimony was affected by knowledge of my perspective. That being said, I have no public stance on the use of metrics in crime journalism, and it is unclear how my reputation could systematically bias data regarding journalists' uses of metrics in particular.

Data Collection and Analysis

This article aims to answer the following question: How do crime journalists interpret and make use of audience engagement metrics? This study implements sequential interviewing. Each case provides a better understanding of the research question; the number of cases is unknown until the study is completed, and different questionnaires are employed across cases (Small 2009). I used an interview guide to ensure I collected data on all desired topics. In order to increase the palpability of collected data and to mitigate recall bias, planned questions prompt participants to discuss specific events in recent memory (Small and Calarco 2022). Reducing the total number of planned questions allowed flexibility for follow-up questions. Because retrospective interview data can blur the distinction between post-hoc justification and action-connected orientation, I prioritized questions about specific recent events over abstract questions about attitudes toward metrics.

My earliest draft interview guide did not include questions about metrics. Nevertheless, metrics were a prominent theme in the first interview that I conducted, and I revised the interview guide to include related topics (Lareau 2021). Unless reporters raised the topic themselves, metrics were addressed toward the end of each interview, after soliciting accounts of daily work routines, editorial relationships, and coverage decisions.

My coding process was iterative, facilitating my efforts to refine categories and locate confirming and disconfirming evidence for emergent theory. I indexed transcripts using qualitative data analysis software after every fifth transcription (Deterding and Waters 2021). While indexing, I developed substantive codes and wrote memos to develop analytic codes. When I recognized patterns in the data, I presented my impressions to participants to prompt their assessment of generalizability and recall relevant experiences (Weiss 1995). Where I claim that an observation is typical, I attempt to locate disconfirmatory evidence or present negative cases to assess external validity and improve the heterogeneity of the written

report (Lareau 2021; Small and Calarco 2022). The comparative logic of this study operates between individual journalists, news organizations, and positions within those organizations.

Findings

Metrics Regimes and Evaluative Logics

Participants described distinct metrics implementations that I call *metrics regimes*. These regimes shaped reporters' orientations toward quantitative evaluation and the professional culture that informed how reporters later interpreted metrics that validated their work. These regimes may depend on the discretion of only a handful of newsroom managers, and regimes vary in their durability. In more punitive regimes, newsrooms implemented explicit metrics, quotas, rewards, and punishments. In the most extreme cases, quotas were transparently tied to reporters' compensation, and failure to meet metrics goals could result in discipline or layoffs. Robert, a mid-career court reporter, recalled a "dark period" under a harsh regime wherein compensation was tied to pageviews. He noted that although it damaged newsroom morale and forced colleagues to compromise their integrity, his beat was "kind of red meat enough" that he "never had to do anything to [. . .] compromise [his] integrity in order to get pageviews."

James, a court reporter who worked at a different newspaper under the same corporate owner, detailed a similarly harsh regime. After receiving a presentation on metrics in 2012, the newspaper "laid off 25 percent of their newsroom so they could add audience engagement positions." Reporters' raises and bonuses were tied to a gamut of productivity and engagement metrics, such as posting three stories per day on average, including an aggregation of someone else's story, and interacting with readers in the comment section twice per day. This meant that even crime reporters were forced to change practices: Kenneth, an investigative reporter and James' coworker at the time, noted that editors' internalization of click-based evaluation varied, and the most extreme requirements were relaxed when a new managing editor was hired. Nevertheless, the click craze affected the newsroom's representations of police. After a reporter's video of a police officer dancing on the street went viral in 2014, "every goddamn year after that, there was a requirement [. . .] to find a police officer dancing in the street to try to recreate that magic." This aligns with critics' fears—recurring positive representations of police were literal clickbait.

In less harsh regimes, newsroom managers would applaud individual metrics achievements in newsroom emails and meetings but rarely penalize workers explicitly over metrics. Even so, less punitive tactics could damage morale. Charles, an editor, explained how past experiences informed his efforts to institutionalize a healthier regime:

> They had what we called the Hunger Games board, so it's a screen and there's a box with your name on it. And depending upon the proportion of traffic on the site at that minute that you are making, your box grows or ebbs. [. . .] That's insane. That's dystopian shit.

Harsh pageview metrics regimes destroyed newsroom morale. Recalling the ensuing exodus of reporters, Robert said his newsroom was "bleeding millennials." The professional culture that formed in response to such regimes resembles Christin's (2020) account of resistance to metrics. One informant described the scorn he was subjected to after writing a high-performing story about a local store's unique pastry: "All of my colleagues made fun of me. People I respected would be like, 'Oh, so you get to eat a free [pastry], huh?"' Journalists have long associated pageviews with "chasing clicks," and as early as 2014, newsroom metrics companies like Chartbeat avoided pageviews when demonstrating their product to newsroom staff (Petre 2021). Pageviews were also associated with sensationalist crime coverage that attracts superficial audience interest. Linda, an early-career police reporter, explained how a pageview regime at a prior newsroom incentivized stories aligned with the clickbait theory's expectations: "I have my name on some really gross stuff out there that I'm not proud of, because my editor pushed to have these awful headlines that just sort of took the humanity out of what was going on for the clicks."

Reporters resented the intrusion of click-based evaluation in part due to "causal uncertainty" and "action uncertainty" (Petre 2021), often expressing confusion or frustration about the seemingly arbitrary mechanisms that led one story to go viral, whereas another went unread. "Each story is a gamble," said Steven, a late-career breaking news reporter. Paradoxically, journalists who gained substantial knowledge about metrics and implemented best practices developed robust empirical justifications for the view that pageview numbers were ultimately out of their control. Lisa, a mid-career court reporter, stressed that "a lot of the click numbers have nothing to do with their reporting, or the quality. It has a lot to do with: Did somebody post it on Reddit? Or did Google put it on its homepage?"

Pageviews also fostered "meaning uncertainty"—plural interpretations of organizational identity and purpose can foster alienation or interpersonal conflict (Petre 2021; Battilana, Besharov, and Mitzinneck 2017). In this case, it was unclear whether these noisy signals of audience interest corresponded to commercial contamination or resonance with conceptions of civic importance (Christin 2020). Metrics could be particularly alienating to reporters who highly valued ambitious and time-consuming projects. If a story with seemingly obvious professional importance performed poorly, did that mean it failed to serve the public?

The professional culture that formed in response to harsh pageview regimes was broadly characterized by newsroom-wide skepticism toward metrics, and I observed it even among reporters who were less directly affected by punitive quotas. Yet, although crime reporters may have shared their colleagues' disdain toward pageviews, they often did not experience the disciplinary consequences of harsh regimes firsthand. Recall that in Robert's experience of a regime with rigid quotas, he notes that although his colleagues were forced to change their working practices to avoid being denied raises or laid off, he was able to continue his typical routines. Similarly, whereas Patricia explained that her colleagues experienced "a lot of anxiety and stress because of the thinking that [quotas] could lead to layoffs," her experience as an early-career police reporter was completely different. "I did not use a lot of my energy really thinking about metrics."

These experiences illustrate the conditions under which professional and commercial evaluation became concordant. Crime reporters' market performance meant that existing professional practices satisfied metrics targets, creating a situation where two evaluative logics produced the same verdict through independent reasoning. Many crime journalists were capable of winning the metrics game with minimal effort—or believing that they had escaped it altogether. Yet as subsequent sections show, this concordance often did not lead reporters to accept metrics as a legitimate basis for evaluating their work. Between 2015 and 2020, the news industry as a whole began to deemphasize pageviews in favor of conversions (i.e., converting a reader to a subscriber), implementing paywalls that limited access to stories to encourage subscriptions (Mele et al. 2019). Accordingly, in my interviews, participants who recounted experiences with harsh, pageview-focused metrics regimes generally spoke in the past tense, recalling either previous workplaces or previous regimes in their current workplace. From an editor's perspective, pageviews alone failed to produce value. "You cannot sustain a news organization on pageviews," Charles emphasized.

The shift toward subscriptions altered the symbolic character of quantitative evaluation. Reporters and editors articulated a causal theory connecting prestigious professional practices like investigative reporting or accountability journalism to financially essential subscription revenue streams. According to this theory, ambitious projects motivated readers to pay for access to stories that they could not obtain from competing news organizations. "I think the feedback is more quality now, because it is about engagement or if somebody wanted to subscribe," said Kim, a mid-career investigative reporter who said she did not spend much effort evaluating her metrics. "The metrics are a way to say, this story did what it was supposed to do, and it resonated with people and they cared about it enough to pay for it." For reporters who were less invested in metrics, the fact that certain stories they were most proud of had produced subscriptions was a convenient second-order justification of their routine practices.

Informants who tested the causal theory reported that it was supported by engagement data. Editors broadly agreed that ambitious projects reliably produced value. "Day-in, day-out blood and guts police reporting does not convert, it does not get subscriptions at the level that a profile of a victim absolutely does," Charles said. "What does lead to conversions? Deeper pieces, stories you can't get anywhere else, you know, stories with a lot of accountability," William explained. Editors elaborated the causal logic of this theory via the sales concept of an acquisition funnel—stories that bring first-time users to a news site generate "top-of-funnel" traffic, whereas more unique projects convince readers at the "bottom" of the funnel to subscribe.

In many cases, subscriptions serendipitously resolved the uncertainties that had motivated journalists' rejection of click-based evaluation. Under subscription regimes, the same professional practices that reporters valued were precisely what the metric rewarded. Concordance became legitimating rather than contaminating. Of course, not all newsrooms moved away from pageviews, and some informants in newsrooms that emphasized subscriptions described co-equal or secondary pageview prioritization (i.e., pageviews are top-of-funnel, subscriptions

are bottom-of-funnel). Yet, broadly speaking, subscription regimes allowed crime reporters to succeed without modifying professional practice.

Crime reporters' favorable market position meant that concordance between professional and commercial evaluation was a durable feature of their work. Yet how that concordance was experienced in practice depended on organizational mediation. Editors played a crucial role in maintaining the separation between evaluative logics, ensuring that reporters could continue to experience their work as if it were primarily guided by professional judgment.

Editors as Organizational Brokers

Metrics-resistant crime reporters justified their practices through a clear hierarchy. Audience interest was subordinated to professional judgment, and this hierarchy was defended through boundary work that construed click-based evaluation as "dirty" (Petre 2021): "I'm just constitutionally opposed to the idea of marketing and advertising. . . I find it very icky," Robert quipped. My data focus specifically on crime reporters, so I cannot assess whether reporters on other beats resisted metrics in similar ways. What is clear, however, is that crime reporters' market performance created unusual latitude. Their stories reliably met traffic thresholds without deliberate tailoring. On the other hand, editors' descriptions of their workday routines, interactions with fellow managers, and evaluation logics showed how quantification was more extensively incorporated into professional practice. "To borrow the Moneyball phrase, we are card counters at the table with SEO," Anthony explained. "We're gaming that audience."

This contrast clarified a puzzle: how could members of rigidly hierarchical, metrics-resistant newsrooms nonetheless produce such varied reports of the authority of quantitative evaluation? That variation was systematically distributed across organizational positions. Reporters consistently prioritized professional justification, whereas editors, positioned between executives and reporters, did not always subordinate metrics to professionalism. Editors often had no choice but to get their hands dirty. Corporate owners and executives issued quantitative directives, leaving editors responsible for ensuring that their subordinates met new organizational standards. Accordingly, editors found themselves responsible for resolving tensions between professional and quantitative logics amid a culture of resistance to metrics. Indelicate communication of metrics-driven coverage decisions risked demoralization or revolt. Thus, editors became brokers who solidified crime reporters' insulation from metrics by managing information and strategically reframing metrics-driven decisions to fit editorial evaluation logics (Kellogg 2014). Elizabeth described how she navigated this tension:

> It's a weird culture in the newsroom where editors are given goals for the reporters to get. But as editors, we know that if we sit down with a reporter and say, hey, you need to bring in 200,000 clicks this month, that conversation is never gonna go well. [. . .] So it's like a weird game of figuring out what stories you can assign to a reporter that are going to get clicks, while also allowing them to pursue what they're passionate about.

Because reporters were already producing what the numbers rewarded, Elizabeth could discuss coverage priorities entirely in professional terms. Other editors took similar steps to manage reporters' exposure to and interpretation of metrics without outright concealing quantitative logics. Recall Charles' past experience with the "Hunger Games board" (a practice that still exists in some more recent metrics regimes—a breaking news reporter interviewed in 2024 mentioned a similar set of screens). He invoked that "dystopian" vignette as a foil to justify his own approach to discussing metrics with reporters:

> My strategy on that is that editors care more about metrics than reporters, so that you are steering the general direction in a way that people are going to read it. But you don't have reporters sitting there obsessing over metrics. [. . .] I want to be the one that looks at that [. . .] At the reporter level, it needs to be more of a day-in, day-out conversation about how you do the job. And less of a, 'You're down on metrics this week' conversation.

Editors maintained evaluative separation through buffering—practices that restrict market influences so that internal professional processes can function on their own terms (Lynn 2005). Some reporters acknowledged this dynamic explicitly. "I'm sure the editors have some sort of conversation regularly about metrics. I don't know if it's intentional or not, we're not being exposed to that part of the conversation. Which is nice," Linda said, clearly relieved by the division of labor. "I don't want to think about that. I want to think about my story and how I can write it best." Thus, crime reporters' ability to sustain their experience of solely professionally motivated practice results from organizational performances that conceal or reframe the reality of a quantitative and hierarchical decision-making apparatus. Some editors suggested that insulation enabled different managerial practices. Susan explained how insulation benefited her desk:

> Metrics have not affected us yet. [. . .] The public safety team consistently has the highest numbers, because people are interested in a murder charge or sentencing. [. . .] I think we're luckier than, say, an education team. I don't think school board meetings get read a lot, unless there's some BFD issue going on.

Because editors are responsible for their desk's metrics performance, crime editors may also experience benefits from insulation. David explained how his desk's strong metrics performance allowed him to request resources in a "post-layoff strategy meeting":

> One of the questions that was asked was, which types of stories perform the best? And number one was true crime and investigations, which is largely what my team does. So for that, it was just like, 'keep doing what you're doing.' The feedback I gave in that meeting was, if that's the case, we should have more breaking news reporters [. . .] so that people who are really good at the enterprise investigations can focus on that.

These accounts illustrate how market position enabled brokerage in the service of evaluative separation. Strong audience demand for crime coverage meant that editors could treat metrics as incidental confirmation of what reporters were already doing. Under these conditions, editors could maintain the organizational fiction that professional logic alone governed editorial decisions even as metrics justified high-level organizational decision-making.

Justifying Coverage

Editors cannot always shield reporters from the reality that newsroom managers use metrics to make editorial decisions. Amid declines in newsroom resources, newsrooms cannot cover the full range of events that they used to—and metrics provide precise information that editors use to identify patterns among low-performing stories. Unlike conversations about reporters' job performance or daily assignments, editors may face substantial difficulty reframing the quantitative basis of such decisions. In some cases, failing to reframe decisions ruptures the impression of 'uncontaminated' professional practice that some crime reporters enjoy.

Reporters and editors across a wide range of newsrooms described the use of metrics to justify cutting categories of coverage (save for extremely unusual or interesting instances): car crashes, missing persons coverage, a regularly updated webpage naming homicide victims, robberies and other property crimes, assaults, and nonfatal shootings. Contrary to the clickbait theory, changing local news market conditions and audience interest could justify moving away from daily crime coverage entirely. Carol, an investigative reporter, explained the business logic:

> There are four TV stations in the [local] area, and they all cover crime. [. . .] They are faster than us. They are always at the scene of the crime. We don't have the staffing to do that, so we don't do a lot of daily crime stories, because they don't drive pageviews, because people can read them elsewhere, and they don't drive subscribers. [. . .] Our public safety team, they try to go beyond the daily crime stories, they try to find families of victims, and publish a human interest, second-day story [. . .]. And those are actually more successful than the run-of-the-mill crime briefs.

In rarer cases, metrics could justify eliminating entire beats. Anthony, an editor, explained that his newsroom had reassigned its court reporter to a Black equity beat because "the numbers just didn't back up us having them do that." When I asked whether the Black equity beat produced more audience interest, Anthony clarified that the equity beat was supported by a grant that the newsroom had received rather than audience traffic. He elaborated that routine court coverage produced only modest daily returns—"jury selection and openings" might yield 900–1,000 views, whereas day-to-day updates often drew just 200. Two stories a week might total 1,500 views, a volume Anthony described as "not sustainable for that position"—"so they killed it."

This was a unique admission among my interviews. No court reporter I interviewed described difficulty meeting pageview or subscription goals; Susan cited

court coverage as a reliable high performer. Rather than indicating that court coverage performs poorly in general, Anthony criticized his reporter's inability to move beyond incremental coverage (or to produce more stories per week). "I'd like to go back to it, and try it again and try it in a different way," he added, acknowledging that court coverage could attract audience interest if it moved away from incremental coverage. In the past, court coverage could be relied upon to fill newspaper space, as proceedings were scheduled ahead of time. But in the digital era, such coverage would not satisfy the engagement thresholds that editors were expected to meet. "I think we fully embrace that we don't have holes to fill on a printed page," said William, an editor who had worked at multiple large newspapers. "If I think about some days at [prior newsrooms], we would hold out a space in the print paper for a city council meeting, even though nothing was going on." Informants in other newsrooms corroborated the use of metrics to eliminate or reduce incremental coverage, such as updates on court cases or local government meetings.

Metrics were also used to justify expanding certain stories or categories of coverage. Most commonly, audience data were incorporated into decisions regarding follow-up coverage for individual news events. Barbara, an editor, explained that metrics justified an initial decision to write a follow-up story about a girl who was killed by her father. "People were so intrigued about what happened to this girl, so it was like, let's keep digging and see if there's something else there," she explained. "In a way, the metrics were good, because we never would have turned up what we found, had we done the normal thing." By "something else there," Barbara means 'a good story,' or the kind of story that would be detected by the journalistic gut feeling. This is a key legitimacy test for follow-up coverage guided by metrics. Steven also invoked the heuristic of whether there was "something there":

> If the answer is no, I think more often than not, that's going to be respected, and move on. [. . .] Is somebody going to read some crap story about something that was interesting yesterday? Or is your time better spent finding the next thing, or the in-depth story [. . .] that might attract more readers and subscribers?

Audience interest could also justify data journalism or investigative series focused on certain topics. "We do try to follow topics that we know people care about based on the metrics, like we have a ton of car thefts," explained Jennifer, a mid-career police reporter. "One of my colleagues wrote a story this week about the vast majority [. . .] of them are Kia's and Hyundai's. [. . .] And that story did really well. Apparently a lot of people who own Kia's and Hyundai's in [this city] are very concerned."

These cases reveal the limits of brokerage. Editors can maintain evaluative separation in day-to-day coverage discussions, but the elimination of entire beats or categories of coverage based on metrics cannot be credibly reframed in professional terms. In such moments, the organizational maintenance of evaluative separation breaks down, and reporters must confront commercial logic directly, developing their own strategies to justify their work.

Table 2: Interpretive Strategies.

Strategy	Definition	Relation to Theory	Relation to Evaluative Logics
Avoid	Reporters ignore metrics entirely.	Similar to Oliver's (1991) *avoid*, *defy*, *dismiss*. Unlike Meyer and Rowan's (1997) *decoupling*, reporters often did not ceremonially comply but simply ignored metrics.	Professional logic treated as sole legitimate framework. Commercial logic rendered irrelevant.
Override	When editors agree with professional evaluation, reporters can openly reject metrics and assert professional authority.	Echoes Oliver's (1991) *defy*, *challenge*. Metrics are explicitly subordinated to professional judgment.	Professional logic explicitly asserted over commercial logic when evaluations diverge.
Appropriate	Reporters may engage with metrics only when advantageous; genuine internalization not necessary.	More opportunistic or cynical iteration of *selective coupling* (Pache and Santos 2013): metrics are invoked to bolster professional authority when useful.	Commercial logic subordinated—invoked as supplementary evidence when it supports professional judgment.
Coopt	Reporters incorporate and reinterpret managerial logics (here, metrics) into professional practice, proactively integrating them in ways that reinforce professional values.	Defined by Andersson and Liff (2018).	Boundary between evaluative logics partially dissolved; professional and commercial criteria hybridized.

Responding to Metrics

Insulation and brokerage create the conditions under which reporters encounter metrics: shielded from discipline by market demand and buffered by editors, reporters are able to interpret and respond to metrics in several ways. Within this interpretive space, they adopt four distinct strategies—avoidance, override, appropriation, and cooptation—that represent different orientations toward the relationship between professional and commercial evaluation. The first three maintain professional authority in varying degrees; cooptation partially dissolves the boundary between logics. These strategies are not in principle mutually exclusive. The same reporter may avoid metrics in some contexts while appropriating them in others, depending on organizational pressures and professional stakes. I use "strategy" to describe patterned orientations and practices in response to metrics, not necessarily conscious plans formulated by reporters in advance. Table 2 summarizes the strategies. After developing each strategy below, I report a retrospective transcript-level coding review that describes how frequently the strategies appeared in the interviews and how they varied by organizational position.

Metrics *avoidance* represents the most complete form of evaluative separation: reporters treat professional logic as the sole legitimate framework and decline to engage with commercial metrics at all. Avoidance is sustained by insulation—when

a beat reliably meets metrics targets, no one compels reporters to attend to the numbers (cf. Bromley and Powell 2012). Informants who adopted avoidant interpretations often described their ability to focus exclusively on professional practice as a source of relief or even privilege. Although one might expect avoidance to be concentrated among older reporters who first encountered metrics after decades on the beat, I observed it across all ages and career stages. Joshua, a mid-career court reporter, stated his disinterest: "I literally don't even know how to log into the metrics stuff. I believe that good work will draw people in. So that's what I focus on doing." By claiming—or actually practicing—a lack of interest in metrics, informants cemented the legitimacy of their reporting as independent and free from commercial contamination.

Avoidance also sidesteps the tensions produced by the interplay of editorial and quantitative evaluation. Michelle explained that her avoidance was motivated by past experiences of action uncertainty with respect to pageview metrics. "Did Beyoncé Tweet out your story? Good, you're gonna get a million pageviews. [. . .] I have no personal control over it. So I ignore it." To be sure, other informants might have argued that Michelle was downplaying her agency—but even metrics experts conceded that audience interest can feel like a lottery. Avoidance shielded reporters from this arbitrary dynamic, and practices motivated by professional justification were seen as comparatively less risky. Yet, avoidance depends on sustained market performance. If audience interest waned, editors' brokerage would be insufficient to shield reporters from quantitative productivity expectations. Avoidance, therefore, requires both insulation and minimal organizational interference.

Override represents the most assertive defense of professional authority: reporters explicitly reject metrics as a valid basis for evaluation and assert professional criteria in their place. In some cases, this takes the form of dissent against newsroom policy changes that cannot be reversed by reporters, such as the elimination of entire coverage genres. Here, override is limited to expressive resistance in the form of overt disagreement. If editors eliminated categories of coverage that reporters saw as professionally important, no amount of quantitative evidence would persuade reporters of the merit of that decision. Reporters who disagree with metrics-driven coverage decisions see them as offensive boundary violations. Jennifer vehemently criticized her newsroom's elimination of traffic coverage because she saw abrupt loss of life as intrinsically newsworthy. Reporters also described failed override attempts that were more individual in scope. In some cases, the decision being contested lies outside reporters' control, leaving expressive dissent as the only available form of override. Amanda, a mid-career criminal justice reporter, described her protest against an editor's decision to run a charter school story on the frontpage instead of her police brutality story:

> They said the charter school story had gotten more readers online. If that is what we're using to decide print placement, in one case this guy's dead from a police brutality incident, [in the other. . .] It didn't seem like that big of a deal. Not a life or death situation. Look at policing, it's this huge topic right now [. . .] of all times to brush off this police brutality story [. . .] sometimes we can overuse metrics, that's all I'm saying.

In these cases, frustrated reporters are stymied by formal hierarchy and cannot act upon their interpretive resistance.

In other cases, however, override becomes an enacted practice: despite weak metrics, reporters and editors continue to pursue coverage they deem professionally important. In these instances, override depends on editors' agreement (or indifference) and insulation. Informants frequently overrode metrics to justify continued coverage of local jail and prison conditions. "I'm aware people aren't gonna read the prison stories as widely as I would like, but I'm still gonna do them," Michelle explained. Some editors also said they overrode click-based evaluation in the case of jails coverage. "Those stories do not do well," David conceded. "But it's important, and it wouldn't get covered otherwise if our reporters aren't doing it. So we do those stories." (Recall that David's desk has the best numbers in the newsroom.) On the other hand, reporters could also point to instances when their editor did not share the normative editorial judgment that would allow audience interest to be overridden. "The managing editor there, I'll never forget this-he said, 'People don't give a shit about prisoners."'

These cases demonstrate that override depends on the organizational hierarchy. If no journalist makes a professional case to keep covering car crashes, editors can eliminate such coverage without resistance. But even when reporters do press the case, override requires editorial buy-in: without an editor's agreement that a story carries professional value, disagreement remains at the level of interpretive dissent.

Appropriation selectively draws on metrics as a resource to bolster professional justification. Reporters invoke commercial evidence when it supports professional judgment and ignore it otherwise—subordinating quantitative evaluation to professional authority. Appropriation requires favorable numbers to deploy, making it available primarily to reporters whose beats perform well on metrics. The strategy resembles selective coupling—wherein organizations incorporate certain elements of competing logics to manage tensions (Pache and Santos 2013)—but operates at the level of individual actors rather than organizations, and under conditions where competing logics each justify similar practices.

Appropriation illustrates how market position expands the repertoire: reporters with strong metrics can draw on commercial evidence when useful and disregard it otherwise. Performance evaluations are a strong example. In metrics regimes where pageviews or subscriptions are evaluated in regular reviews, crime reporters almost never described difficulty compiling dossiers to demonstrate audience interest in their work. In such regimes, reporters who otherwise preferred avoidance could easily appropriate metrics as needed. Along a similar vein, when editors eliminated categories of coverage that reporters found professionally questionable or inessential, poor metrics performance was a convenient justification that could be appropriated to support a long-held editorial judgment. This conditional acceptance is intuitive in the sense that resource scarcity questions and audience interest each involve economization. A court reporter who supported scaling down traffic coverage made it clear that metrics resolved a resource scarcity problem: "If we had to try to get basic information on every traffic crash in the metro area, every day, that would be one whole job, nobody will be able to do anything else."

Appropriation could also benefit reporters who aimed to contest editors' formal authority. Some reporters who articulated a more critical professional identity (Ben-Menachem 2026) appropriated metrics to bolster their professional judgment in arguments or negotiations with newsroom managers to justify their preferred genres of coverage. Chris explained that quantitative evidence of audience interest in a story about police accountability became "ammunition" to argue for continued coverage of related issues. Of course, amassing ammunition did not always guarantee success-newsrooms are hierarchical, and editorial disagreements cannot always be resolved by appeals to quantitative evidence. Chris recalled his failures to argue for prison coverage at prior newsrooms: "I wrote memos and story pitches and pulled all these metrics. I tried to make this argument, and then it never happened." Yet some evidence suggests that numbers can persuade editors who otherwise disagree on the merits. Amanda said that her editors "would shy away from stories that could be construed as sympathetic to people in prison, people on the wrong side of the criminal justice system." Yet, because "stories that challenge traditional coverage of the criminal justice system" received substantial audience interest, her editors "became more open" to such coverage.

In cases of *cooptation* (Andersson and Liff 2018), reporters described hybridized evaluation logics and more comprehensive incorporation of metrics into professional practice. Cooptation partially dissolves the boundary between evaluative frameworks, integrating commercial criteria into professional self-understanding. Cooptation was more common under subscription regimes, which rewarded the kinds of work reporters already valued—making integration less symbolically costly. Subscription concordance gave reporters who were open to metrics a basis for "reframing metrics as democratic feedback" (Christin and Petre 2020), an interpretation that reconciles commercial and professional conceptions of journalism's purpose. The favorable market position of crime beats gave these reporters the interpretive space to develop such resolutions.

Editors' managerial competence was cited as an enabling factor for cooptation. James praised an editor's decision to make audience engagement staff accessible to reporters, who would edit headlines according to best search engine optimization practices. In his view, failure to attend to "good" metrics could lead a newsroom to abdicate its civic responsibility:

> We could do a better job of just telling people the goal here is for people to read our stuff. [. . .] We'd write these long, boring city budget stories that no one reads. Why not turn that into something lovely with graphics? There's no initiative to do that. [. . .] It makes the city budget a conversation between reporters and politicians.

This defense of metrics is often limited to modifying the form of news stories rather than the content (Petre 2021). Margaret, a court reporter who was pleased that a review of metrics had ended her obligation to cover traffic accidents, nevertheless expressed discomfort that metrics had crossed the line and affected news content. That said, some reporters did defend the use of pageview metrics to influence news content. Brian, a court reporter, explained that he intuitively identifies a set of potential stories as important or interesting, and he decides which stories in that set

should be written based on past audience interest. He justified this practice based on his commitment to serving his local community:

> How many times have we written about this topic before? [. . .] Is now the time for us to come in with this story? Is that sensitive to the relationship that we have with them? [. . .] We share the concerns and have kind of the same heartbeat that the broader city has.

Brian stressed that his orientation toward pageviews was not the result of labor discipline. Thus, in some cases, crime reporters' insulation from metrics regimes opens up space for metrics to be understood as a resource that journalists can draw on to fulfill their public service mission.

Although crime reporters may find themselves insulated from metrics through no effort of their own, reporters who engaged in cooptation often emphasized individual agency. Chris questioned the consensus I had observed regarding low audience interest in jail and prison conditions stories. "It's very easy to write boring journalism about prisons and jails, because you can't go there," he explained. "The prison stories I've done that have taken off all share one thing in common, which is they're illuminating. And they tell people stuff they don't know." He went on to share an example of a story about prison officials "strip-searching grandmothers" going viral. "So is every prison story going to generate a bunch of traffic? Maybe not, but the interesting ones are." Similarly, James' defense of cooptation needled colleagues who he perceived to be neglecting technical skill development that could help reporters satisfy a digital iteration of journalists' long-standing service mission.

These strategies reveal how professional authority is defended through proactive interpretive practice, with market position structuring the breadth of the available repertoire. The variation across strategies—from complete separation to partial integration—suggests that the defense of evaluative authority is a differentiated set of practices shaped by structural position, biographical experience, and the symbolic character of the prevailing metrics regime.

A systematic review of strategy instances across transcripts (frequency counts) offers suggestive evidence about this variation, though several caveats apply. This study was not a survey with consistent question wording and ordering—interview guides evolved across the data collection period, and varying follow-up questions were asked. Additionally, this coding exercise reflects my retroactive judgment about which strategies were present in each transcript rather than a prospective or deductive coding scheme [see Small and Calarco 2022, pp.63–67 for further discussion of quantifying semi-structured interview data]. With those limitations in mind, avoidance was the most commonly observed strategy (24 transcripts), followed by override (21), cooptation (18), and appropriation (12). Roughly half of the reporters in the sample exhibited more than one strategy during their interview, consistent with the argument that these are situationally adopted repertoires rather than fixed orientations. One transcript did not contain an instance of any of the four strategies.

Beat-level variation in strategy prevalence broadly tracks the theoretical argument. Avoidance was most concentrated among investigative reporters, for whom the structural conditions of the position-low publication frequency, strong subscription concordance-can make metrics largely irrelevant to daily practice. Cooptation,

by contrast, was most common among breaking news reporters, a pattern that likely reflects generational socialization with metrics dashboards (breaking news reporters tend to be younger and early-career) and career incentives to build a visible track record rather than a lack of insulation. Override was present across all beat categories, consistent with the argument that professional evaluation criteria are broadly durable on the crime beat. Appropriation showed no strong beat-level concentration, fitting its characterization as an opportunistic resource available primarily when favorable numbers can be deployed as ammunition.

The co-occurrence of strategies further clarifies their theoretical significance. Avoidance and cooptation only co-occurred once—reporters who have integrated metrics into professional self-understanding are not also ignoring them entirely. (That co-occurrence reflects a transcript covering 25 years in the profession and a wide variety of metrics regimes.) Override and cooptation, by contrast, co-occurred frequently: reporters who integrated metrics into their practice also defended professional evaluation criteria when metrics diverged from their judgment (or otherwise articulated and enforced strong boundaries regarding the appropriate application of each evaluation framework). This pairing suggests that cooptation should not be read as capitulation to commercial logic or a broad indicator of "metrics acceptance." Reporters who think carefully about search engine optimization and audience interest often maintained strong convictions about what categories of coverage were worth pursuing regardless of performance, occupying different dimensions of professional practice rather than opposing positions on a resistance-to-acceptance spectrum.

Discussion

This study examined how crime reporters interpret and respond to audience metrics that largely validate their existing professional practices. Crime reporters often succeeded on metrics through practices developed independently of commercial logics, yet many still refused to grant metrics evaluative authority. This finding shows that concordance between professional and quantitative evaluation does not eliminate conflict over the authority to define valuable work. When professional and commercial logics identify the same work as valuable, conflict can shift from the level of practice to the level of justification.

This defense of professional evaluative authority had both biographical and structural foundations. Many reporters' orientations toward metrics were forged under punitive pageview regimes that tied compensation to clicks, threatened colleagues' livelihoods, and made quantitative evaluation appear professionally contaminating. The culture of resistance that formed under those conditions endured even after the shift to subscription metrics, which more often rewarded the depth, exclusivity, and accountability reporting that journalists already valued. The pattern suggests that reporters who never personally experienced the harshest regimes inherited—or at least worked within—an occupational culture that treated commercial evaluation as illegitimate. Resistance to commercial evaluation can therefore persist beyond the specific structural conditions that originally produced it.

Editors played a crucial organizational role in sustaining this separation. Through brokerage, editors absorbed commercial logics and communicated coverage priorities in professional terms, allowing reporters to experience their work as guided by editorial judgment. This organizational maintenance of evaluative separation depended on market performance. When crime desks reliably met metrics targets, editors could treat quantitative data as incidental confirmation of work reporters were already doing. When metrics motivated decisions that could not be reframed in professional terms, brokerage broke down, and reporters confronted commercial logic directly. These breakdowns revealed the organizational work that ordinarily keeps evaluative logics separate.

Market position also structured the repertoire of strategies reporters used to manage the relationship between professional and commercial evaluation. Insulated reporters could avoid metrics entirely, override weak numbers in defense of professionally valued coverage, or selectively appropriate favorable data as rhetorical ammunition. Reporters who engaged in cooptation felt compelled to justify this choice to skeptical peers, underscoring the strength of professional evaluation norms. The transition from pageview to subscription regimes reshaped this repertoire by altering the symbolic valence of concordance. Pageviews were easy to dismiss as crude and commercially contaminating; subscriptions, which rewarded depth and exclusivity, were harder to dismiss because they rewarded traditional professional practice. Yet, this symbolic compatibility posed a subtler threat to evaluative authority. A metric that rewards the same qualities professionals value is harder to dismiss as irrelevant, making the defense of professional authority over evaluation criteria both less urgent in practice and more consequential in principle.

These dynamics have implications for the content of crime news. The defense of professional authority shaped coverage: reporters who could override metrics continued covering jails and prisons despite low audience interest, whereas reporters whose editors did not share their professional evaluation were unable to sustain such coverage. Metrics-driven elimination of incremental court coverage, traffic accidents, and nonfatal shootings reflected moments when commercial logic overrode professional judgment—often without resistance, because reporters lacked strong professional justifications for continuing that coverage. Where reporters selectively appropriated metrics, some used audience data to argue for critical coverage of police and criminal justice institutions, leveraging favorable numbers to expand editorial tolerance for accountability journalism. If crime news shapes public attitudes toward punishment (Beckett 1999; Enns 2016; Duxbury 2023) and police violence (Reny and Newman 2021; Moreno-Medina et al. 2022), then the evaluative frameworks governing newsroom decisions carry consequences beyond the newsroom.

These contributions clarify the study's main scope condition. The dynamics documented here depend on crime journalism's favorable market position. The evidence supports a claim about crime reporters' relative insulation, not a systematic comparative account of metrics across local newsroom beats. Still, the interviews suggest several ways market position structures exposure to quantitative evaluation. Participants consistently described crime and sports stories as strong audience performers, whereas education or routine local government coverage fared worse.

The data do not necessarily show that editors applied categorically different evaluative principles across beats (perhaps because recruitment emphasized editors who currently manage crime reporters). Rather, the quantitative framework likely had a different practical force depending on market position. Strong crime metrics may have expanded editors' latitude to rely on professional criteria when managing crime coverage: because crime desks often met quantitative expectations without intensive intervention, editors could discuss coverage in professional terms and reserve explicit metrics talk for edge cases, such as weak individual performance or low-performing coverage categories. When a desk consistently underperforms, my argument predicts that metrics would become more disciplinary and brokerage would take on a corrective rather than protective character. Some editor accounts gesture at this dynamic: Susan observed that her desk was "luckier than an education team," and Carol—a reporter on a separate investigative team—explained that although "reporters who have regular beats do have pageview goals and page view targets," for i-team work, "they're kind of more loose on that rule."

Metrics performance also varied within crime reporting itself. Crime provided a structural advantage: the raw material of the beat generated reliable audience interest relative to many other beats. But this does not mean that every crime reporter automatically performed well. Beat-level advantage created a favorable floor; reporter competency and story execution shaped the ceiling; stochastic audience uptake created variation around both. Anthony's account of a court reporter producing two stories per week, drawing modest pageviews, illustrates how insulation can break down because an individual reporter fails to realize the beat's market potential. The relative weight of competency may vary. One breaking news reporter said she felt uncomfortable taking credit for her strong numbers because the stories were so inherently interesting to readers. Even well-executed stories, moreover, were subject to the action and causal uncertainty that reporters described repeatedly. Metrics may therefore be more useful to managers for comparing beats, coverage categories, or individual crime stories than for finely ranking crime reporters against one another.

Productivity pressures also intersected with prestige. Crime news work spans the full status range in local newsrooms, from trainees in high-volume breaking news positions to senior investigative roles. Prestige broadly tracks story volume: higher-status positions publish less frequently, so pressure to produce more declines as journalists move up the hierarchy. Beat-level insulation and position-level prestige are therefore nested. A favorable market position provides desk-level protection, whereas a reporter's specific job description structures how that protection is experienced individually. Prestige also shapes the meaning of strong metrics performance. For an exclusive investigation, strong numbers can legitimate professional judgment because the work is already legible as substantively important. For lower-status or "clicky" work, strong numbers may intensify suspicion that the story is commercially tainted. Investigative reporter Daniel made this distinction explicit. When I noted that "clicky" stories can be seen as "dirty" by peers, he replied, "We don't write them because they get clicks. We write them, and they get clicks."

The relative absence of intra-newsroom competition in the data is theoretically informative. Reporters almost always responded to questions about competition by discussing inter-organizational dynamics: being scooped by reporters

at rival outlets or navigating structural differences in television and print tempo. Such responses almost never broached metrics. On the rare occasions when intra-organizational competition dynamics arose, accounts centered on collegial norms of attribution or editorial judgment rather than dashboard rankings. Amanda's experience is a rare counterexample: her frustration at losing front-page placement to a charter school story on the basis of online readership illustrates how crime reporters largely remain oriented toward professional evaluation criteria even when metrics intrude.

This pattern is consistent with the insulation argument. If insulation creates conditions under which reporters experience their work as professionally rather than commercially guided, we would expect crime reporters not to perceive each other primarily as competitors on a metrics dashboard—they are not fighting over a scarce quantitative resource because they are all doing reasonably well. The asymmetry between inter- and intra-newsroom competition is also telling. Framing competition around being scooped by reporters on the same beat in competing organizations, rather than outperforming colleagues on dashboards, suggests that professional identity on the crime beat is organized around the news logic of exclusivity and speed relative to outside rivals, not the commercial logic of relative audience capture within the newsroom. That framing is itself a form of evaluative boundary work. Reporters on weaker-performing beats may watch the dashboard with an eye toward colleagues' numbers in ways crime reporters need not—but I did not interview them.

The study's design imposes limits. It draws on retrospective interview accounts, which may be subject to selective memory. Although recruitment emphasized crime journalism broadly rather than metrics, self-selection on attitudes toward metrics remains possible. Because interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2024, I was unable to systematically observe temporal change in metrics regimes. The analysis is specific to U.S. metropolitan newspapers; variation across media formats, national contexts, or professional paradigms may yield different dynamics. The study also cannot make strong claims about reporters on other beats, since I recruited crime reporters and editors who primarily manage crime coverage and systematically privileged firsthand accounts over secondhand comparisons to colleagues' experiences.

A related concern is that respondents' accounts may reflect post-hoc rationalization or impression management rather than action-connected orientations. The study design addresses this in two ways. First, interviews emphasized concrete coverage decisions, editorial conflicts, performance evaluations, and particular stories rather than abstract attitudinal testimony—accounts less susceptible to impression management (Small and Calarco 2022). Second, metrics questions were often introduced at the end of interviews (unless a participant mentioned them earlier), after extended accounts of daily practice, and several reporters expressed genuine uncertainty or indifference when directly prompted. That pattern of absence is consistent with avoidance reflecting an enacted practice rather than an interview performance. The talk-action gap cannot be fully closed in a study of this kind, but the design mitigates the most tractable sources of bias. These limitations could inform future research. Systematic comparative research across beats within the same

newsrooms could test whether the interpretive repertoire documented here narrows or otherwise differs under conditions of weaker market performance, and whether brokerage shifts from protection to discipline. Because metrics regimes change rapidly, temporal variation should also inform scope conditions. The argument may also extend to professional domains where established occupational logics happen to satisfy quantitative performance targets—settings where, as in crime journalism, the alignment is incidental rather than cultivated. Future research might examine emergency medicine, higher education (see Pardo-Guerra 2022 for a contrast), or other domains where professional and commercial evaluation plausibly align.

This study occupies a middle position on the breadth-depth spectrum of research designs. A single- or two-newsroom ethnography would be better positioned to observe action directly and enable systematic cross-beat comparisons, but would sacrifice documentation of variation across metrics regimes, which are often short-lived and vary widely across otherwise similar organizations. A survey would enable systematic comparison at scale, though a well-designed instrument would depend on the kind of conceptual groundwork this study provides. The semi-structured interview approach captures organizational variation that an ethnography could not easily recover, whereas the open-ended format allows symbolic meaning and context to emerge on respondents' own terms. Recent fieldwork on local crime news work has been sparse, and my hope is that the variation documented here provides a framework for future studies to build on.

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Acknowledgments: I gratefully acknowledge feedback from my colleagues in Columbia Sociology's Qual Lab, my graduate school cohort, and several anonymous reviewers and journal editors. In particular, I thank Ari Galper, Emily Mazo, Tey Meadow, Michael Schudson, Mario Small, and Bruce Western for their generous engagement with this project at various stages. Finally, I thank the journalists who shared their time and experiences with me.

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