

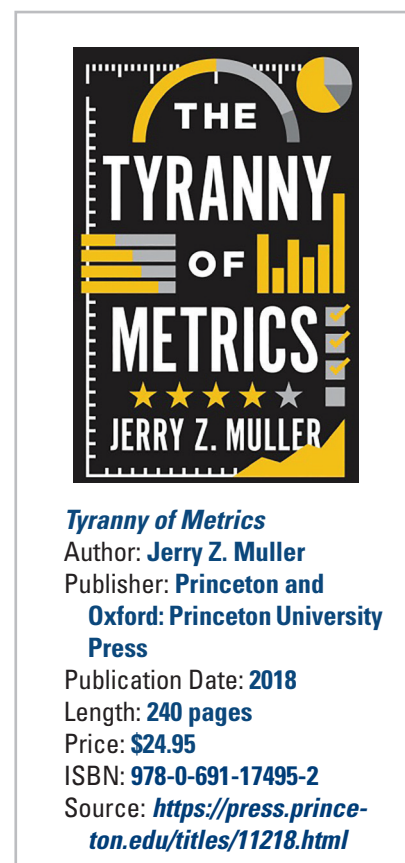
Tempering Our Number Fixation with Good Judgment

Lara Mancuso, Ph.D.

During his tenure as chair of the history department of the Catholic University of America, Jerry Z. Muller, whose research focuses on the history of capitalism and public policy, met with increasing demands to provide statistics to measure the performance of his department. Not only did these requests take time and effort away from research and teaching, but how and if the documentation produced was used by university administration to actually improve the quality of higher education was not clear to him. Hence, the inspiration for *The Tyranny of Metrics*, his critique of the inappropriate and excessive use of quantitative assessment.

The Good, Bad, and Inaccurate

Drawing upon literature from multiple fields to analyze case studies from education, health care, law enforcement, the military, businesses, and non-profits, Muller shows that when properly combined with personal experience and knowledge, and when aligned with professional values, metrics can support the identification of outliers (e.g., to single out



misconduct) and the establishment of efficient standardized procedures for routine tasks (e.g., checklists in aviation).

However, when used without judgement or used to reward and punish professionals, quantitative indicators are inadequate at best and counterproductive or even life-threatening at worst, as his examples from health care reveal. Muller shows how the inappropriate use of metrics takes away time from tasks that really matter; discourages risk-taking, innovation, and cooperation in the workplace; and can induce professionals to manipulate data by avoiding assignments that might have a negative impact on indicators, by deliberately lowering standards and benchmarks, and by omitting information, among other strategies.

In addition, ill-judged emphasis on numbers contributes to the misconception that things can be improved no matter what, with no consideration that sometimes a problem's solution lies outside of organizations. For example, poor student achievement in schools lies rather on social inequalities than on teacher performance.

Muller's account is engaging and convincing, and the main takeaways from the book are pertinent, current, and applicable to other fields:

- Not everything that can be measured is worth improving or relevant.
- Excessive and unwise usage of metrics can lead to undesirable negative consequences.
- Counting cannot always identify pain points or opportunities.

Metrics in Information Professions

Muller's critique cautions professionals in the fields of archival sciences, librarianship, and information management (IM), to approach particular metrics with caution.

Librarianship

For instance, starting with bibliometrics, citation analysis, and patron-driven acquisition, librarianship uses metrics to evaluate information retrieval, data accessibility, peer review processes, resources usage, and more.

Archival Science

In archival sciences, the "Standardized Statistical Measures and Metrics for Public Services in Archival Repositories and Special Collections Libraries," approved in 2018 by the Society of American Archivists and the Association of College and Research Libraries, establishes performance metrics for user demographics, reference transactions, reading room visits, collection use, events, instruction, exhibitions,

and online interactions.

In addition, since 2014, the Digitization Cost Calculator (<http://dashboard.diglib.org/>) can be used to plan digitization projects: it calculates time and resources needed, according to the number of scans, staffing data, and processes involved.

Information Management

IM professionals often provide metrics on the following: use of off-site storage (number of boxes stored and recalls); advisory services (number of consultations and turnaround time of advice provided; number of projects/initiatives in which the department is involved); disposition (number of boxes/terabytes destroyed or sent to archives); number of policies approved and/or revised; number of education sessions provided; and the number of attendees for these sessions.

Muller urges professionals in these fields to approach these and other metrics with consideration of whether quantitative and qualitative indicators are properly combined, and if the former actually corresponds to what is intended to be measured and improved.

Accountability vs. Transparency

Especially relevant for IM professionals, the author points out how accountability is often reduced to something that can be demonstrated through figures, whereas transparency

is associated to merely making these figures available to the public. He considers this practice misleading because it implies that organizations perform properly simply by collecting statistics that can be monitored by external bodies. ARMA International's Generally Accepted Recordkeeping Principles® of Accountability and Transparency support his critique because they establish the need for a person of authority to respond for decisions and the need to document those choices.

Muller also says that making metrics publicly available can potentially hinder political negotiations, government performance, and diplomacy, as open and honest communication by public servants, who are aware that all their positions can be made available to the public, can be hindered. Muller argues that it is more effective to reveal sensitive matters to the public only once they are settled. Although this argument is not as convincing as others in the book, it can certainly contribute to current discussions on oral government, the duty to document, and freedom of information.

In total, Muller's book is a welcome reminder that while quantitative metrics has its place in organizations, it should be used wisely and paired with careful judgement.



About the Author: Lara Mancuso, Ph.D., is enterprise records specialist at BC Hydro and Power Authority, in Vancouver, Canada. She has taught information governance and security courses for the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. She earned a master's degree in archival studies from the University of British Columbia and a Ph.D. in history from El Colegio de Mexico. She can be contacted at lara.mancuso@salomon-maimon.org.



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