



The Tyranny of Metrics

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How the obsession with quantifying human performance threatens our schools, medical care, businesses, and government

Today, organizations of all kinds are ruled by the belief that the path to success is quantifying human performance, publicizing the results, and dividing up the rewards based on the numbers. But in our zeal to instill the evaluation process with scientific rigor, we've gone from measuring performance to fixating on measuring itself. The result is a tyranny of metrics that threatens the quality of our lives and most important institutions. In this timely and powerful book, Jerry Muller uncovers the damage our obsession with metrics is causing--and shows how we can begin to fix the problem.

Filled with examples from education, medicine, business and finance, government, the police and military, and philanthropy and foreign aid, this brief and accessible book explains why the seemingly irresistible pressure to quantify performance distorts and distracts, whether by encouraging "gaming the stats" or "teaching to the test." That's because what can and does get measured is not always worth measuring, may not be what we really want to know, and may draw effort away from the things we care about. Along the way, we learn why paying for measured performance doesn't work, why surgical scorecards may increase deaths, and much more. But metrics can be good when used as a complement to--rather than a replacement for--judgment based on personal experience, and Muller also gives examples of when metrics have been beneficial.

Complete with a checklist of when and how to use metrics, *The Tyranny of Metrics* is an essential corrective to a rarely questioned trend that increasingly affects us all.

The Tyranny of Metrics Details

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From Reader Review The Tyranny of Metrics for online ebook

Matthew Trevithick says

4 stars, but one more for novelty. At times conservative and at times liberal, a hard look at what the obsession with metrics is doing to modern life, across education, business, military, government, foreign aid, and more. The author makes a highly persuasive case using succinct arguments to deconstruct what the downsides are to the obsession with numbers. And it's quite alarming.

Mehrsa says

It's good for what it is and I think it's right, but there is nothing new here. Read Cathy O'Neills Weapons of Math Destruction, which is better and more interesting.

Matt Chester says

I really enjoyed Muller's 'The Tyranny of Metrics,' and felt it delivered exactly the type of read I thought it would. In a world that is becoming more digitized and people are pushing for increased transparency, Muller writes about instances where it appears we've become too reliant on blindly following the data behind metrics without understanding the harm that may come.

To be clear, Muller is not against metrics but he lays out very good arguments for why they may not always be appropriate, how they get gamed or manipulated, and why they are useless unless they are able to be judged subjectively by people with intimate knowledge of the field and where the shortcoming of those metrics might be. Stretching across areas like schools, police departments, militaries, governments, hospitals, charities and more, Muller gives great examples that are directly applicable and always thought provoking. If anything, I do wish there were a bit more meat on the bones of some of his examples with expanded discussion-- but perhaps there will be a follow up!

The only part that seemed a bit off was towards the end when he spent a short chapter equating modern society's growing need for transparency and metrics to the need for politicians, governments etc. to exercise more privacy and reduce transparency. The argument he was making was about how if every piece of email of a public official is made public, then they will be less likely to speak to their colleagues/opponents with candor and less able to reach the optimal compromises because they will have to worry about these negotiations being made public. While some of his arguments felt valid, it made me squirm in my seat a bit the more he pushed for the right of government to operate with reduced transparency.

All in all, though, I really enjoyed this book and would recommend it to anyone who lives in the world of data and metrics like I do. Muller provides a good mirror with which to look at how you treat metrics and consider whether you need to incorporate more of the 'art' into the 'science' of data and metrics.

Mal Warwick says

I was not surprised by historian Jerry Z. Muller's comments about "metric fixation" in his illuminating new book, *The Tyranny of Metrics*.

Some years ago the chairman and CEO of a Fortune 500 company remarked to me that nobody, not even Jack Welch, the then-idolized leader of General Electric, could possibly turn in solid revenue and profit increases steadily, quarter-after-quarter, year-after-year, through ups and downs in the market. It was clear to him that somebody was cooking the books at GE. I had been in business long enough then to understand how easy it is to shift sales and revenue from one quarter or year to the next and how other steps could be taken to fudge the numbers. (I was also aware of Welch's reputation as "Neutron Jack" for his ruthless practice of "downsizing" to increase profits, a practice that can also be timed to give the appearance of steadily increasing profits.) It had been clear to me for many years that numbers can lie.

In his new book, Muller tackles our society's obsession with metrics and accountability. However, "[t]his book is not about the evils of measuring," he writes. "It is about the unintended consequences of trying to substitute standardized measures of performance for personal judgment based on experience. The problem is not measurement, but excessive measurement and inappropriate measurement—not metrics but metric fixation." In just 200 pages, Muller assesses the use and misuse of metrics through case studies drawn from a wide range of fields: colleges and universities, K-12 education, medicine, policing, the military, business and finance, and philanthropy and foreign aid. The research he cites, and the examples he chooses, are compelling.

I've had my own intimate experience with the misuse of metrics in both philanthropy and foreign aid. More than thirty years ago, when I was running a consulting agency that raised money for nonprofit organizations, I wrote and spoke to whoever would listen about the absurdity of measuring nonprofit performance on the basis of its fundraising costs. Years later, when I became involved in consulting with NGOs in developing countries, I saw for myself the folly of the metrics obsession that had seized hold of the international development community after Bill Gates began proselytizing on the subject. That fixation on the numbers forced far too many charities and government agencies to funnel money toward easily measured but trivial or even irrelevant programs while ignoring others that might actually have some positive impact in the field.

Muller sums up the problem nicely. "There are things that can be measured. There are things that are worth measuring. But what can be measured is not always what is worth measuring; what gets measured may have no relationship to what we really want to know. The costs of measuring may be greater than the benefits. The things that get measured may draw effort away from the things we really care about. And measurement may provide us with distorted knowledge—knowledge that seems solid but is actually deceptive." Amen.

Some of the examples Muller cites are familiar to the public at large. "Teaching to the test," for example. The tendency of some surgeons to decline to operate in difficult cases because failure would lower their success ratios. And the tendency of police under pressure from politicians to make the numbers look better by classifying felonies as misdemeanors or altogether refusing to write up crimes. These are just a few of the many sad ways that our obsession with accountability distorts our understanding of the world around us.

Among the many unintended consequences of the misuse of metrics that Muller cites are the following:

****** Inducing people whose performance is measured to divert their efforts to what gets measured;

** Promoting short-termism (as in Wall Street's obsessive preoccupation with quarterly earnings reports at the expense of companies' long-term health);

** Discouraging innovation and risk-taking;

** Sidetracking nonprofit staff members (or corporate employees, for that matter) from focusing on the mission that motivates them; and

** Forcing employees to spend time logging data instead of doing their jobs (a requirement that was a major factor in convincing my brother to close his psychiatric practice many years ago).

Muller concludes *The Tyranny of Metrics* with a useful checklist of ten questions that any manager should ask when considering the application of metrics at work.

Rhys says

The Tyranny of Metrics is a clear expression of mainly the deleterious effects of using metrics in the workplace - where counting shouldn't be counted on.

"Dan Cable and Freek Vermeulen of the London Business School recall many of the problems we have explored: the depressive effect of performance pay on creativity; the propensity to cook the books; the inevitable imperfections of the measurement instruments; the difficulty of defining long-term performance; and the tendency for extrinsic motivation to crowd out intrinsic motivation" (138).

In other words, what you measure is what you get - so be sure you know what you want.

Sarah Glen says

The important point of this book is simple, and yet frequently elusive in real life: "Measurement *demands* judgment."

While I enjoyed some of the case studies, especially those about the founding of accountability metrics in education, Muller could've used a stronger edit. He waxes profusely, frequently restating the same point across 4-5 sentences. **My advice:** Read the Quartz write-up rather than the whole book.

A few other quotes I enjoyed:

"There are things that can be measured. There are things that are worth measuring. But what can be measured is not always what is worth measuring; what gets measured may have no relationship to what we really want to know. The costs of measuring may be greater than the benefits."

"Making things comparable often means that they are stripped of their context, history and meaning."

"The spreadsheet is a tool, but it is also a worldview — reality by the numbers... (stripped of the intangibles)" — Steve Levy

Hidde says

Muller explains the dangers of trusting metrics for anything, with examples from government, business and charities. It's a good reminder of what could go wrong, and shows that judgment based on knowledge and experience trumps judgment based on metrics.

Jan Rice says

As I was reading the midsection of this book, I was thinking it was a chore--where "chore" means taking some notes--but an absolutely necessary one, given the revelatory nature. Then, the ending hit me with an emotional wallop. Maybe it would not have if I hadn't read on through the material.

The wallop was this: we have made an idol out of transparency. And this: our whole society is like a bad marriage. We don't know how to fix it, but we can't just divorce everybody.

Before I read this book, I had thought it was going to be pitting two writers I've valued against each other. For doesn't Daniel Kahneman talk about the usefulness of checklists and algorithms in slow thinking and good decisions? From the title alone (and not knowing what "metrics" signifies), I had thought Muller was going to be disagreeing. But no; metrics in this sense means measurement of outcome to render judgment of institutional productivity and success, as in school testing, crime reporting, and medical statistics.

The book is not a long, complicated one. Minus the notes, it's less than 200 pages. Instead of being a history, like the other Muller books I've read, it's an analysis and would-be remedy through better understanding that focuses on what usually can't be attended to since outside the spotlight of our attention (in part due to its interdisciplinary nature). Muller says his own experience as chair of his department at a private university is what drove him to write it. It's for the frustrated people who work in all our institutions--universities, schools, the medical system, law enforcement, the military, and (even) business and finance. It's for frustrated people. It's for those who have been judged--those of us who've been deemed resistant to progress when we protested the disregard of our own expertise.

I read another Goodreads review saying *Tyranny* is less interesting than another related book, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*. But see: right in that title is "Big Data," the villain. That surely grabs the attention, like the polemics in scripture where whatever actually happened has been doctored into a tale of good and evil that meets the needs and aspirations of a target group. But Muller doesn't write like that.

We need a light shone on the problem, that is, a light of another sort than metrics furnishes, and not more good vs. bad guys.

Measurement in and of itself isn't bad; it's the uses to which it's put. Metrics became so popular because we live in interesting times.

Society is in flux, and we haven't figured out pluralism. We Americans used to pride ourselves on having done so. We--and Western Europe--would look down on other societies whom we deemed less successful at being liberal democracies, but we underestimated the extent to which our success was based on our being more more homogeneous, or at any rate, or at any rate run by a homogeneous group that was characterized by shared values and mutual trust.

Now that we are more diverse along multiple dimensions, we have tried to be "more objective" by substituting metrics for missing levels of trust. In business, management became cut off from workers--I think here of the kinds of changes in companies portrayed in *American Pastoral*--and owners/shareholders from management. The application of metrics is a covert way of saying "We don't trust you" and of asserting control. But to do so meant reducing evaluation to the lowest common denominator and, often, changing the rules on what the purpose of the company is. Is it producing a fine-quality product? Or is it producing numbers that will tranquilize managers and pacify shareholders?

Then we take economic models that don't even work so well in business and apply them to the other systems lacking in the information conveyed by economic indicators like price or supply and demand.

Since the '60s, the Left was distrustful of society. Subsequently the Right wanted to see the bottom line. The Left became susceptible to pressures to justify government expenditures. Costs of education and medicine exploded relative to other parts of the economy, adding to the growing distrust of professionals. Everyone wanted transparency. Everyone wants to see the bottom line, and that's what metrics promised.

Sometimes the goals at which we're aiming are mutually exclusive. If one goal for colleges is to be more accessible, that means admitting students who are less well prepared. And then the graduation rate is going to drop, not rise, nor are incomes for graduates going to be higher. Demanding that the college meet some of those goals may be in conflict with the core mission of the particular school, if that mission is to educate more students from the lower classes. Also, if we make job income of graduates a measure of success, we put pressure on institutions of higher learning to produce more investment bankers, consultants, and high-end attorneys. Do we need more? We're inadvertently measuring education only in terms of money-earning potential.

Here are my notes re the public school system: A coalition of the political left, right, business, and civil rights workers all wanted measurement. It was thought that the achievement gap was due to teachers' lack of professional ability. No Child Behind showed no results after ten years, and essentially none since the '70s. Unintended consequences: the problem isn't that the tests can't measure or diagnose children, but that they themselves became the criteria for judging schools. Test-taking skills became what was taught, rather than the subject that was to be measured. Under the pressure, creaming--eliminating the poor-functioning from the results--and cheating occurred as well as teaching to the test, destroying the predictive ability of the tests. Race to the Top under Obama judged teachers as well as schools. Incentives--pay for performance (P4P) doesn't work, but schools went all in. These measures reward extrinsic motivation, not intrinsic, meaning the reason teachers became teachers--the desire to teach children. Paradox: better education widens, not shrinks, the achievement gap since educability is based on human capital. The catchy names signify pious hopes, not achievable goals. The emphasis on measuring English and math detracts from overall education and demoralizes teachers. The power to effect the wished-for change is not in them, but they are blamed.

The continuation of expensive metrics in the absence of achievable goals becomes virtue signalling.

Here's a pertinent article from the education columnist of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Date written in blog is July 9, 2018; published in print edition on July 23. <https://www.myajc.com/blog/get-school...>

My notes on medicine: nowhere are metrics more in vogue than in medicine. Metrics are helpful for information and diagnosis. They are also touted for cost control and effectiveness of services. Muller gives three examples of successful programs that were developed from inside by the professionals themselves and rewarded intrinsic motivation. Those successes, however, were applied punitively to other institutions. The institutions that developed the programs were *already* high-functioning systems. Theoretically, applications of such measures will make patients, doctors, and insurance companies act like consumers, but that hypothesis is not supported by the results of studies (done, moreover, by professionals who have a stake in supporting the hypotheses, so that their findings are all the more significant). Again P4P does not work, and represents the triumph of hope over experience. P4P has unintended consequences, such as neglect for conditions not being evaluated. Creaming and "treating to the test" occur. Medicine is treated as (only) a profit-making venture.

Do these results show the venality of human beings? I think what they show is the adaptive ability of human beings. We want to figure out what's going on; predict and control. If the rules change we try to adapt. If the measurement of one condition indicates its relative importance, we treat it rather than the condition that's not being measured. If readmissions are used against a hospital, outpatient services are expanded so that the "readmission" is now an "outpatient" service. What's going on often isn't blatant cheating but, rather, adjusting to the new rules, and, in that case, can you fault the institution? The unintended consequence of the form of measurement is to create new rules, to which we can expect adjustment. Or, as Muller puts it, measurement changes behavior.

Measurement also is costly and time-consuming, and detracts from doing anything--from the missions of institutions. Measurement decreases creativity and risk-taking, e.g., doctors who avoid operating on the worst-off patients. Measurement will get at the low-hanging fruit, that is, surgeons whose patients are suffering disproportionately poor outcomes quit, but after that, little systemic improvement occurs despite the outlay of money and time.

When we get into charities, measurement has become all about overhead vs. money spent on the mission, to the point of being counterproductive. They should learn from the military's advances in measurement in the area of counterintelligence. Measure, not input--what the charity does--but outcome, based on observation and knowledge of local conditions, *not* a generalized and uninformative overview. Outcome is the bottom line, not what the charity *does*.

An negative example of measurement from the military: Vietnam-era body counts. American soldiers died trying to retrieve bodies to back up those body counts.

Even in business, where you might think some of these measures work since the goals *are* economic after all, P4P only works for rote types of tasks that lack intrinsic rewards. Otherwise, people want wider recognition and reward, not just for their numbers.

Muller ends with a list of predictable negative outcomes and a checklist on how to use metrics. He gave that info at the outset, and once I'd gone through the book, I understood it.

It's his "Excursis" on "When Transparency is the Enemy of Performance" that especially got to me. It's very brief, and I was reading between the lines or, maybe, adding in related information. I was reminded of the extensive 2016 *Atlantic* article on "How American Politics Went Insane"--same sort of thing. He's saying (like Daniel Kahneman) that the outcomes we desire also have downsides, and those we wish to avoid aren't without positive aspects. He's explaining why perfect transparency would be counterproductive in intimate relationships, politics, diplomacy, and intelligence work. The latter two, diplomacy and intelligence work,

are obvious, I think; *The Atlantic* article is a long explanation regarding politics. As to marriage/relationships, imagine what it would be like if our every thought scrolled along our foreheads, as with closed-circuit TV.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/...>

The book's been a revelation to me; I hope I'll be less in thrall to metrics-based judgments.

Reid says

If your work is anything like mine, the bosses have become acolytes of metrics, the pseudo-science of numerically evaluating everything that everyone does as a way of tracking and improving service. On the surface, this makes a great deal of sense. How can you know that you have employed a mediocre teacher or an incompetent nurse without some data to demonstrate their ineffectiveness? How can you compare one hospital or college with another without knowing what their outcomes are? But, as anyone who has ever been subject to the blandishments of metric-driven management, things are not always as they seem.

Let me give you one excellent example. There are national statistics published yearly about hospitals. I work in a hospital with mortality and morbidity statistics that are appalling in comparison to most of the other hospitals in the area. We must be doing something wrong, right? Far from it. Because we are a Level One trauma center, we take on the most challenging of cases, the sickest of the sick and the most broken of the injured. More of them die; more of them are very ill. Now, the statisticians claim to take into account all of these factors with risk scores, yet we still do very poorly on these scales. A patient looking at those statistics without any background information will think that they must avoid our hospital like the plague, when it could well be that we may be just the place they need to be. (Fortunately, very few patients actually do this, but that's another story).

I am a middle manager and at every meeting a table of metrics is marched out that purports to measure just how well we are doing our jobs. Fortunately, I do not work in the kind of place that rewards good metrics with pay differentials or much other than praise, but even this publication of statistics (in the name of transparency) is misleading, demoralizing, and shaming. As the author of this fine book points out, those are some of the unintended consequences of a dependence on metrics.

The central thesis of this book is one with which I wholeheartedly agree: that which can be measured may not be the most important indicator of quality work. And (the corollary), those things which are most important may not be amenable to measurement. I can give you another excellent example from my own experience. Our clinic does very poorly when it comes to female patients who get their mammograms done. We encourage the providers to order them, even present them with report cards on how well they are doing (more metrics), yet the numbers rarely budge. As we dug a little deeper, it became evident that there were some serious systemic problems preventing some women from getting mammograms, particularly those at or around the poverty line. Our institution has no mammogram machine, and the most commonly recommended place to get this done does not accept the kind of insurance that most of these women have; transportation to a location that does accept their insurance is prohibitively expensive. And our clinic cares for more women who fit into this low income category than others. In other words, we can refer to our heart's content, but these mammograms are never going to get done until we pull down the institutional barriers to care. But none of this shows up in the metrics.

Now, I will admit (as does the author) that some professions respond well to metric measures of their work.

In the financial sector, there really is no other valid way to evaluate someone's work other than the amount of money they bring in (though he also points out that this does not take into account the mentoring and teaching in which every true professional should engage). In professions where there is little in the way of personal motivation other than money, metrics may also be quite useful. But these professions are the exception rather than the rule.

One of the distinctions that Muller astutely points out is that between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In those jobs taken on solely for pay, extrinsic motivation (money, threat of demotion or termination) may be the sole reason a person comes to work at all. But for most of us, there is a great deal of intrinsic motivation; the feeling of being of use, pride in doing something well, appreciation of our company and its mission. For many professionals (professors and nurses come to mind), because there are many struggles when practicing those professions, there is almost always a great deal of intrinsic motivation (otherwise we would go do something else). The reason this distinction is so important is because the use of metrics can be so deeply demoralizing, reducing one's profession to a series of numbers while completely ignoring what is truly meaningful to the employee.

There are many other very important aspects of this craze for metrics in this book and I encourage you to give it a read if you are being judged on the basis of them. It does feel as if this is a once over lightly treatment of the topic; though he has many sections, several of them are only a few pages long and do not even begin to speak to all the implications of the use of metrics. Still, as an introduction to the hazards and pitfalls, as well as the legitimate uses of metrics, it is a fine read.

Peter Geyer says

The title of this book suggests that it could be a polemic of sorts against measurement, more specifically "metrics" – something dismissed early in the piece by the author. Muller presents the idea, backed up by research and case studies, that the use of metrics to guide management of everything from management to education, the military to charities often achieves the opposite of its stated aim.

He begins with his own experience as a dean in a university faculty and the growing pressures to justify everything according to numbers and algorithms to such an extent that the actual purpose of the faculty – educating people – gets lost in an avalanche of form-filling and spreadsheets, results in the employment of more and more administrative staff to cater for the numerical information generated, assesses academic staff according to criteria that have little if anything to do with scholarship, sanctioning or firing those that don't meet these standards.

He notes that these processes also result in the system being gamed, so that employees meet the standards and so their jobs. Examples are given from several sectors: hospitals where surgeons to the easy cases, not the more difficult where someone might die or reclassifying outpatients and the like, as well as various strategies in the military and education as well as in business.

In the local news this morning, there's a piece about how employees of a bank which had a scheme to have primary school children put money in those accounts (their own or the bank's) which had no funds in them 30 days after being opened. They did this because otherwise they would not receive a particular reward related to the bank's incentive system. The bank found out about this and sanctioned no-one, nor did they notify the regulators. A currently-running Royal Commission into the finance industry has repeatedly exposed all sorts of gaming the system in this way.

A presumption of this approach is that people can only be extrinsically motivated i.e. by money and that intrinsic motivation, such as that you would hope to see in education, medicine, government and the military, as well as financial institutions. If you've been unemployed in Australia or the UK in particular, then this method has been applied to you, and those you have to consult, including outsourced "employment" entities, or the privatised education system where training is being offered.

Muller's book has a continuing theme of pay for performance, which some here want to apply to teachers as a motivator, and he demonstrates that this idea really achieves the opposite, from low-level jobs to CEOs and senior executives, because the process takes those engaged in it away from the aims of the organisation or their profession. I must admit that this doesn't surprise me at all, and is painfully obvious, from the time I encountered it in my workplace in the late 1980s (and no, it didn't apply to me: I was just asked to work longer hours without being paid).

As an historian, Muller provides background to this idea, which has come and gone over the years under the rubric of "scientific management" a downside of which included the decline of interest in the work put in front of you, because the individual, their knowledge, experience and expertise isn't valued as input or perhaps in principle.

Muller is an excellent writer, particularly in the first part, which he describes as more theoretical, the second part being given over to examples from various fields. It doesn't take long to read, and because it's not a polemic (he does provide some pages of remedial suggestions) the prose is also matter-of-fact and so largely unobtrusive. I'd never heard of him before, and I'm tempted to look for his earlier books, to see what I can find out from them and have a relaxing read as well.

Darren says

Metrics is a word that can convey many feelings and emotions. It can be the means of beneficial analysis and quantification, as well as being something one is a slave to, recording unrealistic or unrequired data 'just because'. For many, it is no longer just measuring the performance of something but the measurement of measuring itself that is in focus in the real world.

This book considers, therefore, the real tyranny of metrics and the obsession that many hold with this management elixir and seeks to discover if the problem can be changed.

It was an interesting, thought-provoking and engaging read. Surprisingly so, if you consider the subject is hardly going to set the world on fire. The author may be swimming against the accepted tide and holds up metric-mania for possible ridicule. This is not a bad thing when the real motivation of metrics is lost. There is a precedent – everyone in working life will have experienced where a description or measurement of a process can be, for some, more important than the underlying process itself.

Not everything is bad with metrics, far from it, but it is the application and reasoning that is often skewed. The author does not just pour cold water on the idea of metrics though – he seeks to show an applicable use that can be beneficial in the process. Yet reprogramming years of possibly wrongly accumulated knowledge may be a challenge.

It is definitely a book worth considering, whether you are already on-side with the author's views or are open

to a possible contrarian argument. The book may appear overly academic for the casual reader, but it is a manageable read with a modicum of focus and it can service several audiences well. Its readability is aided by relatively short chapters and good internal signposting.

Tom Mackay says

A sustained critique of what Muller calls "metric fixation" is necessary and long-overdue. Muller captures how the overuse and dependency on metrics and quantification, particularly for evaluating performance, is hollowing out and damaging key social, cultural, political, commercial, and philanthropic institutions. Spelling this out in a succinct and accessible manner for an audience broader than academia is vital. For that, Muller should be commended.

However, the book is not as hard-hitting as it needs to be, it reads as a rushed effort, and its broader analysis is superficial, at least in terms of its contextualisation. Worse, it overlooks or downplays key structural and ideological factors. Nowhere, for instance, is neoliberalism mentioned or really even alluded to. Muller is right to highlight that there's no single cause, but some causes are more significant and more influential than others. Economic transformations and the social and political dominance of the fiscal right should be given much more weight than they are. Moreover, the critique of transparency is wrongheaded and the examples used are lazy. It is here that Muller's ideological convictions start to become abundantly clear. The problem, according to Muller, isn't neoliberal capitalism but an obsession with transparency coming from both the left and the right. This isn't just an aside - this is the foundation from which the entire argument is built.

So while the book nicely captures some of the consequences of "metric fixation", it fails to adequately account for its underlying causes. True, Muller offers the reader a guide of how and when to use metrics appropriately. But without pointing readers to the broader structures that are encouraging this fixation, the tyranny will then persist. Again, a sustained critique is needed more than ever and it is great that work has begun. Regardless, we need much more than a conservative exposition of a problem stemming from conservatism.

For more critical insights, read Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism*, especially Chapter Six ('All that is solid melts into PR') and Annie McClanahan's critique of credit scoring in chapter two of *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First Century Culture*.

Dave says

Once metrics drive promotions, bonuses, and firings, they will be gamed. Just because something can be measured doesn't mean that should be. For profit organizations have one goal - profit, non-profits including government agencies have many, they shouldn't be run like a business. This is Muller's argument in a nutshell of a nutshell.

He gives his argument in the first chapter and then expands and supports through out the rest of the books.

It's been my experience that once a metric becomes a determining factor for someone's job, it gets gamed. And that's the main argument against metrics. It also seems that pay for performance doesn't work in for-profit so why transfer to non-profits.

A lot of this is things that I've felt or sense but it helps for the author to bring it all together.

however, since he gives everything away up front and writes in a more academic style, it gets dry after 100 pages, which is ok because the book is only like 185 pages.

So next time a politician wants to do no child left behind or a something like that, read this book. Metrics often are misused in the private space and are even worse in the public / non-profit space. Mueller really hammers that.

David Wineberg says

Too many metrics are killing productivity

During the great famine in China, local officials yanked plants out of the ground and raced ahead of Mao's itinerary to plant them at his next stop, thus fooling the chairman into thinking bumper crops were everywhere. They kept their jobs and their heads, but as a result, Mao declared there was no famine and refused to release government stores of rice to the starving. Fifty million died. This is the poster child for metrics.

The Tyranny of Metrics is an anecdote-filled examination of how industry, services and government have gone overboard with self-defeating metrics. Muller comes at it from a personal angle as well as a piece of research. He is a history professor, bogged down in the mindless world of forms and stats. It is crippling his own research and networking time, and does nothing to further his field, his career or his own satisfaction.

He says there are three components to the metrics fixation:

- replacing judgment with numerical values
- publicizing numbers to make institutions transparent and accountable
- managing people is to give them numerical targets and evaluations

Ironically, despite all this measurement, productivity is lagging. Make that because of.

This is the Soviet system, where the central authority set goals for factories, services and bureaucracies, and in which workers find ways to achieve those goals at the cost of quality, service, risk-taking and innovation. Examples are students who can pass tests but have little knowledge, subprime mortgages on false applications, police who hide crimes, and banks that open phony accounts for existing customers to meet quotas. Even the federal Government Accounting Office (GAO) got renamed Government Accountability Office, (which managed to prevent confusion by recycling its initials). There is no better way to see this in action than Ken Loach's Palme D'Or-winning film I Daniel Blake, which shows the UK's performance-obsessed unemployment office in action. The objective is to spend as little time as possible with customers, and refuse as many as possible for the slightest misstep.

Muller proves his points with perverse outcomes galore. Hospitals keep dying patients alive for 30 days because that's the measure of treatment success. Surgeons decline to operate on iffy cases for fear of them dying too soon. Creative teachers quit and move to private schools where teaching to the test and abandoning real learning are not the main activities. Universities cripple research in favor of reporting on every aspect of education, right up to how much each graduate is earning ten years later. All their efforts are focused on moving up the rankings in the various, competing lists. The cheating by teachers, administrators and politicians on No Child Left Behind are legendary.

Muller ends with ten points to ponder when you find yourself in an evaluation situation. A simple rule of thumb, he says, is that if the object of your measurements can be altered by the process of measurement, the results can be less than accurate.

A 2006 survey of HR managers found that metrics and rankings “resulted in lower productivity, inequity, skepticism, decreased employee engagement, reduced collaboration, damage to morale and mistrust in leadership.” So more and more firms do it every year.

David Wineberg

Pete says

The Tyranny of Metrics (2018) by Jerry Z Muller is an interesting look at problems caused by misusing metrics. It's impressively short and Muller has read widely and pondered the problems caused by over relying on poor metrics.

Muller outlines why metrics have been used. It looks at increasing costs and people wanting, wisely, to improve productivity. Metrics were also seen as a way of resolving the principal / agent problem. They were also seen as a way of doing something objective to assess outcomes. Looking at numbers and working on productivity also helped manufacturing improve. Applying similar ideas to services, wars, education, health, police and other areas seemed like a good idea.

In practice, however, using metrics has led to many perverse outcomes. In education, just getting more people to go to University and get good grades has led to more people just going, many of whom don't gain much from their education and also to US 'grade inflation'. Their professors, meanwhile pump out more papers and join paper citation circles to pump their 'impact factor'. In war 'body counts' as a measure of success in Vietnam contributed to the US failure there. In medicine it's led to doctors avoiding difficult cases. Optimising for short term profits has even harmed many businesses.

Muller concludes by providing a guideline for when and how to use metrics.

Muller isn't against all metrics, but he is making a very good case that they are often misused and that people need to be very careful about how and where they are used. The book is very much worth a read for anyone interested in policy or economics.
