

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS



NEW MEDIA UNIONS

Organizing Digital Journalists

Nicole S. Cohen and Greig de Peuter

ROUTLEDGE

Focus

New Media Unions

Organizing Digital Journalists

**Nicole S. Cohen and
Greig de Peuter**

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2020 Nicole S. Cohen and Greig de Peuter

The right of Nicole S. Cohen and Greig de Peuter to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-32711-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-44945-1 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	vi
<i>Successful union drives and union affiliation, May 2015–November 2019</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	x
1 Motivation	1
2 Activation	12
3 Mobilization	25
4 Recognition	42
5 Negotiation	57
6 Transformation	72
<i>Bibliography</i>	86
<i>Index</i>	96

Introduction

A positive precedent

It's a smile befitting the making of media labor history. On October 16, 2019, the *Los Angeles Times* published a photo of journalists and bargaining committee co-chairs Caroline A. Miranda and Anthony Pesce high-fiving each other, a beaming smile on Miranda's face. Moments earlier, a tentative agreement was reached between the L.A. Times Guild and the *Los Angeles Times*.¹ The bargaining committee had been in drawn-out first contract negotiations for 15 months, and Guild members mounted several high-profile actions, including sit-ins, walkouts, and social media campaigns, to win a strong contract. And win they did. The proposed agreement contains immediate pay raises (some members will see an \$11,000 boost in year one of the three-year contract); limitations on management's ability to out-source work; provisions to increase newsroom diversity (for open positions, managers will have to interview at least two candidates from historically underrepresented groups, including women, Black, Latino, Asian American, Native, and LGBTQ journalists); healthcare benefits; extended parental leave; a just-cause clause (meaning employees can no longer be fired at will); and improved intellectual property rights.² When ratified, this will be the first union contract in the "138-year history" of the "steadfastly" non-union paper, and it will transform working conditions for the 475 media workers who belong to the union.³

The L.A. Times Guild is one of over 60 new media unions that have formed since Spring 2015. What began as a "wave" of digital-first newsrooms organizing unions has developed into a full-blown movement to unionize journalism in the United States. Although journalism in North America has been a relatively unionized industry since The Newspaper Guild formed in 1933,⁴ newspaper union membership has declined over the past few decades alongside shrinking employment in journalism,⁵ and until the wave kicked off, unions had not made headway into the expanding digital-first

journalism sector. (A few digital outlets were unionized prior to 2015: the Times Company Digital was the first “stand-alone on-line news organization” in the United States to organize in 1995 with The Newspaper Guild of New York, now the NewsGuild of New York;⁶ AOL UK unionized with the National Union of Journalists in 2006; progressive news website Truthout in 2009; and The Daily Beast became a unionized shop in 2011 after a merger with *Newsweek*, and negotiated its own collective agreement in 2014. In 2015, Canoe.ca became the first digital site in Canada to unionize.) So, the announcement in April 2015 that Gawker Media was unionizing with the Writers Guild of America, East (WGAE) took the industry and labor movement observers by surprise.

A union, understood by many as a relic of a fading industrial age, belied assumptions about digital-first newsrooms like Gawker: laid-back workplaces staffed by young writers who are underpaid but happy to be employed, fueled by a techno-libertarian ethos more common to tech startups than to legacy media outlets, housed in offices that look more like nightclubs than newsrooms. Indeed, just three months prior to Gawker unionizing, *The Washington Post’s* conclusive account of “why internet journalists don’t organize” cited structural and ideological barriers, including limited awareness of unions and no class power among a “generation of younger workers . . . who’ve built personal brands that they can transfer to other media companies.”⁷

Gawker Media’s union drive was the first in recent years to challenge assumptions about noncommittal millennial media workers predisposed to job hopping. In a statement announcing unionization, instigator Hamilton Nolan wrote, “the online media industry makes real money. It’s now possible to find a career in this industry, rather than just a fleeting job.”⁸ He argued that journalists need a voice in decisions about their work and working conditions, and listed a few of the major issues that later union drives would thrust into the spotlight: intense working conditions, long hours, unpaid overtime, precarious employment, management disorganization, no benefits, sexual harassment, challenges to editorial independence, and low and wildly unequal pay, especially among women and racialized workers. Nolan indicated broader aspirations, too: “There are plenty of companies in this industry whose workers could desperately use the help of a union. If we can show that it’s possible, I hope that a positive precedent will be set.”

A precedent was indeed set: soon, journalists at dozens of digital outlets, newspapers, and magazines unionized, including Vice, Huffington Post, Slate, Vox.com, *The New Yorker*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *New York* magazine. In November 2019, the print and digital editorial, video, design, photo, and social media staffs at 24 publications owned by publishing giant Hearst Communications—including *Cosmopolitan*, *Men’s Health*,

and *Harper's Bazaar*—announced they were unionizing with the WGAE. If recognized, these 500-plus workers will constitute “one of the largest editorial units in the media industry.”⁹ By the time we finished writing this book, over 60 outlets had unionized (our list, updated at the time of writing, is on page vii). Workers joined the WGAE, which historically represents film, television, and radio writers, and branches of The NewsGuild, the journalists' wing of the 700,000-member Communication Workers of America. Four years after Nolan's call to arms, what media commentators have called a “wave” of organizing looks more like a movement.

This book investigates a brief but intense period of union organizing in journalism, primarily but not exclusively in digital journalism. Although it has been the digital-first outlets that have attracted most media attention, many newspapers, especially small newspapers, and several magazines have also unionized in recent years. We begin the book by considering the reasons why journalists want to unionize, and follow journalists as they collectively diagnose systemic issues; engage in the process of organizing a union from scratch; face anti-union backlash from management; use communication strategically to mobilize support and win recognition; and participate in collective bargaining, winning significant gains and creating a new labor code for journalism in a digital age. Contemporary unionization in journalism represents continuity through change rather than disruption and novelty. While some elements of organizing campaigns are new and specific to the current dynamics of journalism, many aspects reflect historical patterns of collective organizing and management responses, both within and beyond journalism.

Each chapter considers the range of processes and practices involved in organizing labor unions. Taken together, the insights in this book suggest that if journalism is to have a future, it must be organized. As the journalists who we interviewed have demonstrated, labor organizing is not just about improving working conditions for individuals, but is a broader effort to build organizational infrastructure that can transform journalism, making it accessible, inclusive, and kinder to those whose commitment to journalistic ideals keeps them in such a volatile, precarious industry. Unionization is just one strategy to address journalism's hyper-commodification in contemporary capitalism—others have advocated for public, non-profit journalism and worker-owned co-operatives, for example.¹⁰ Our study of class relations in digital journalism provides a counter-perspective on an industry in flux, whose protagonists—young journalists confronting precarious futures—are using the collective organizing process to articulate a bottom-up vision for journalism's future. As a journalist who helped organize her newsroom told us, “our generation is kind of screwed. And it's going to take unionization to really save us . . . from this precarious situation that we're in.”

Journalism, labor, and organizing

The term crisis has been used by scholars and commentators to describe journalism's current state for well over a decade now. At its most narrow, "crisis" is shorthand for the declining profits newspaper corporations enjoy as advertising revenue shifts from print-based to digital media. But the resulting challenges for journalism include mass layoffs of reporters; shuttering of newspapers, especially local and community papers, across Canada and the United States; increased consolidation and concentration; control by and influence of tech giants Facebook and Google; shrinking newsrooms and a corresponding decline in robust reporting; and general uncertainty as for-profit media rapidly adjust business models and strategies in reaction to digital technologies and a changing political economic climate.¹¹ Such challenges have serious implications for citizens and for journalists, who bear the brunt of change and uncertainty, as crisis discourse is regularly used to justify layoffs, precarious employment, and shrinking journalistic resources.

While not denying that this period of change and uncertainty has serious consequences for journalism, in this book we advocate a shift in perspective from a crisis discourse, which can limit options for change and usually argues for restoring journalism's profitability without questioning its economic organization.¹² Drawing on critical political economy and labor studies perspectives, we propose a focus on collective organizing in journalism as a way to understand its current dynamics. Attending to labor and resistance foregrounds the power and social relations coursing through contemporary journalism—many of which have long been present, such as the challenges of commodifying a social good such as journalism and the class relations between capital and labor—highlighting who pays for journalism's crisis, and who has visions for alternate futures.

While not a major focus of journalism studies and certainly a neglected area of digital journalism scholarship, research on work and labor in journalism has shed light on journalists' working conditions, including speeded-up and intensified workloads, declining autonomy, and precarious work.¹³ As one writer puts it, digital media in particular "relie[s] on its young . . . staff to churn out content, respond nimbly to every change in the Facebook algorithm and sometimes even mine their personal pain for clicks in the pursuit of blistering traffic growth."¹⁴ Scholars have documented journalism history from a labor perspective,¹⁵ and examined the formation of journalists' unions and labor conflict.¹⁶ More recent case studies provide insight and commentary on efforts to unionize journalists in digital and legacy media.¹⁷ This book contributes to this scholarship with an in-depth, empirical study of journalists' efforts to unionize since 2015.

We focus on the process and social relations of organizing. Drawing on labor movement scholars, we conceptualize union organizing as more than an effort to set up an organization to represent journalists, or what may be considered “a set of practices and tactics,” as Melanie Simms and Jane Holgate put it. Rather, argue Simms and Holgate, organizing should be considered a “wider political initiative” that privileges “worker self-organization for power.”¹⁸ The aim of organizing should not just be membership growth for the sake of it, but rather building worker power with political objectives in mind.¹⁹ Such an approach is evident among the new media unions forming in journalism. As we demonstrate, while parent unions play key roles in organizing unions, self-organization is a vital dynamic propelling the new media union movement, and journalists’ aims coalesce around democratizing the workplace, fairness, equity, and safeguarding their ability to practice journalism with integrity.

Key to organizing, stress Simms and Holgate, is to ask what unions are organizing for. For Jane McAlevey, organizing’s “primary purpose is to change the power structure.”²⁰ Organizing is not just about improving material gain for union members, although certainly improvements to pay and benefits are core motivators. More so, organizing is aimed at empowering “ordinary” people, as McAlevey puts it, to develop a power analysis that can be used for long-term transformation. As the following chapters demonstrate, the unionizing process has enabled journalists to develop and deepen a power analysis of the industry in which they work and the relations between those who hold powerful positions—management, owners, and media companies—and those who do the labor of producing the journalism that keeps companies going. Organizing helps workers “connect the dots” between their individual experiences and “the larger system” in which they live and work, and, ultimately, aims to “transfer power from the elite to the majority.”²¹ Through organizing, journalists have articulated a vision of sustainability, accessibility, equity, and integrity, core expectations that can improve individual working conditions while raising standards across the industry and ensuring journalistic work is accessible and protected.

As Astra Taylor writes, organizing “aims to bring others into the fold, to build and exercise shared power,” and “involves . . . aggregating people around common interests so that they can strategically wield their combined strength.”²² The work of organizing, she adds, is threefold. It requires “creating infrastructure and institutions, finding points of vulnerability and leverage in the situation you want to transform, and convincing atomized individuals to recognize that they are on the same team (and to behave like it).” Prior to 2015, as Lydia DePillis highlighted in the *Washington Post*, digital journalists were understood to be brand-building, competitive

individuals hustling to secure coveted positions at hyped media companies, whatever the cost (usually low salaries and burnout). But studying efforts to unionize digital journalism, and journalism more broadly, shows that young media workers are just as inclined to build and mobilize solidarity and friendships, as they realize it's employers who benefit most from journalists estimating their value in individualized terms. As sociologist Rick Fantasia writes, "in a society in which individual initiative is held to be the only legitimate avenue of social mobility and improvement, collective action is a remarkable accomplishment."²³

Digital journalists organize

The entrance of more than 2,000 young media workers into the labor movement in five short years is remarkable indeed. To understand this development, we conducted 49 in-depth interviews with 48 people (some were group interviews, and some follow-up interviews) between October 2016 and July 2019. We interviewed journalists who served on organizing committees or bargaining committees in 20 different newsrooms, as well as union staff at the WGAE and the Canadian Media Guild, The NewsGuild, The NewsGuild of New York, and the Washington-Baltimore NewsGuild. While we identify some participants in the book, most have chosen to remain anonymous. We also draw on media coverage, observation of union social media accounts, union-produced documents, and collective bargaining agreements. The story we tell in the following pages is shaped by the perspective of those we interviewed, who all were either active organizers and leaders in their unions or union staff and organizers. While we critically assess the limits and possibilities of the movement to unionize journalism, overall, we share our interviewees' perspective that transforming digital journalists' material conditions through collective organizing is vital for ensuring journalism as a form of potentially democratic communications has a sustainable future in the digital age.

A note on terminology: throughout the book, we use the term *journalist* because we are mostly writing about workers who do journalistic work, or who "research, investigate, interpret and communicate news and public affairs" in newspapers and digital formats.²⁴ Despite this general description, we recognize that journalistic work is transforming and that people perform a great diversity of work in both digital and print-based outlets—new bargaining units include social media editors, photographers, and video producers, for example. Therefore, we also use the term *media worker* throughout the book, which enables an expansive understanding of the ever-changing terrain of media production, where the divide between "legacy" and digital media is increasingly blurred.

The book's organization follows the process of organizing, or the steps involved in moving from considering the idea of a union to bargaining a first collective agreement, highlighting the social relations that make collective action possible and powerful. Chapter 1, "Motivation," examines what compels digital media workers to form unions, including improving working conditions, gaining a voice, safeguarding editorial integrity, addressing racial and gender inequity, protecting workers during layoffs, and confronting industry volatility. Chapter 2, "Activation," outlines the forces that propel a collective diagnosis of problems into full-fledged union drives, and the broader contextual and structural conditions that have made digital media worker unionization possible. Chapter 3, "Mobilization," looks in detail at how organizing drives unfold, paying particular attention to the affective modes journalists have embraced in digital media union drives and the central role communication has played in organizing. Chapter 4, "Recognition," focuses on the struggle unions have faced to win recognition—including aggressive management anti-union campaigns—and how workers mount strategic public pressure campaigns that also serve to build solidarity in and between newsrooms. Chapter 5, "Negotiation," explains the process of collectively bargaining a first contract and assesses the first collective bargaining agreements that have so far been won, many of which include important gains for the sector that have raised journalists' salaries, provided a modicum of stability, and boosted expectations overall. Chapter 6, "Transformation," considers how journalists, newsrooms, and unions have been transformed through the organizing surge in digital media.

In addition to a piece of scholarly research and a public document of a particular moment in journalism and labor movement history, we hope this book will also serve as a guide for other workers seeking to organize their workplaces. If we can leave readers with one point, it's one made by a journalist who started a union in her digital newsroom: "if you don't have a union," she says, "you can make one."²⁵

Notes

- 1 Meg James, "Los Angeles Times Reaches Historic Agreement with Its Newsroom," *Los Angeles Times*, October 16, 2019, www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-16/los-angeles-times-first-guild-contract.
- 2 L.A. Times Guild, "L.A. Times Guild Reaches Agreement with Management on Historic First Contract," *LA Times Guild*, October 16, 2019, <https://latguild.com/news/2019/10/16/los-angeles-times-guild-reaches-agreement>.
- 3 James, "Los Angeles Times Reaches Historic Agreement with Its Newsroom."
- 4 Daniel J. Leab, *A Union of Individuals: The Formation of the American Newspaper Guild, 1933–1936* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).
- 5 Elizabeth Grieco, "Newsroom Employment Dropped Nearly a Quarter in Less Than 10 Years, with Greatest Decline at Newspapers," *Pew Research Center*,

- July 30, 2018, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/30/newsroom-employment-dropped-nearly-a-quarter-in-less-than-10-years-with-greatest-decline-at-newspapers/.
- 6 Errol Salamon, "Digital Media Workers are Unionizing Like It's 1999," *Rankandfile.ca*, April 5, 2016, <http://rankandfile.ca/digital-media-workers-are-unionizing-like-its-1999/>.
 - 7 Lydia DePillis, "Why Internet Journalists Don't Organize," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/storyline/wp/2015/01/30/why-internet-journalists-dont-organize/.
 - 8 Hamilton Nolan, "Why We've Decided to Organize," *Gawker*, April 16, 2015, <http://gawker.com/why-weve-decided-to-organize-1698246231>.
 - 9 Maxwell Tani, "Hearst Magazine Staffers Unionizing Across Two Dozen Publications, Forming Giant for Writers Guild of America," *The Daily Beast*, November 11, 2019, www.thedailybeast.com/hearst-magazines-staffers-are-unionizing-across-two-dozen-publications-joining-writers-guild-of-america-east.
 - 10 Victor Pickard, "The Violence of the Market," *Journalism* 20, no. 1 (2019): 154–8; Kim Kelly, "Seize the Media," *Commune*, May 2, 2019, <https://comunemag.com/seize-the-media/>.
 - 11 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Elizabeth Butler Breese, and Maria Leung, eds., *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Robert W. McChesney and Victor Pickard, eds., *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights: The Collapse of Journalism and What Can Be Done to Fix It* (New York: The New Press, 2011); Mike Gasher, Colette Brin, Christine Crowther, Gretchen King, Errol Salamon, and Simon Thibault, eds., *Journalism in Crisis: Bridging Theory and Practice for Democratic Media Strategies in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Emily Bell and Taylor Owen, *The Platform Press: How Silicon Valley Reengineered Journalism*, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University, March 2017, www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/platform-press-how-silicon-valley-reengineered-journalism.php.
 - 12 See Pickard, "The Violence of the Market."
 - 13 See, for example: Nicole S. Cohen, *Writers' Rights: Freelance Journalism in a Digital Age* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016); Nicole S. Cohen, "At Work in the Digital Newsroom," *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 5 (2019): 571–91; Caitlin Petre, "Engineering Consent: How the Design and Marketing of Newsroom Analytics Tools Rationalized Journalists' Labor," *Digital Journalism* 6, no. 4 (2018): 509–27; Errol Salamon, "Digitizing Freelance Media Labor: A Class of Workers Negotiates Entrepreneurialism and Activism," *New Media & Society*, July 17, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819861958>; Merryn Sherwood and Penny O'Donnell, "Once a Journalist, Always a Journalist? Industry Restructure, Job Loss and Professional Identity," *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 7 (2016): 1021–38; Sasu Siegelbaum and Ryan J. Thomas, "Putting the Work (Back) into Newswork: Searching for the Sources of Normative Failure," *Journalism Practice* 10, no. 3 (2016): 387–404; James R. Compton and Paul Benedetti, "Labour, New Media, and the Institutional Restructuring of Journalism," *Journalism Studies* 11, no. 4 (2010): 487–99; Henrik Örnebring, "Technology and Journalism-as-Labour: Historical Perspectives," *Journalism* 11, no. 1 (2010): 57–74.
 - 14 Maxwell Strachan, "The Fall of Mic Was a Warning," *HuffPost US*, July 23, 2019, www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/mic-layoffs-millennial-digital-news-site-warning_n_5c8c144fe4b03e83bdc0e0bc.

- 15 Hanno Hartd and Bonnie Brennen, eds., *Newsworkers: Toward a History of the Rank and File* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
- 16 Leab, *A Union of Individuals*; Walter M. Brasch, *With Just Cause: Unionization of the American Journalist* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1991); Catherine McKercher, *Newsworkers Unite: Labor, Convergence, and North American Newspapers* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Chris Rhomberg, *The Broken Table: The Detroit Newspaper Strike and the State of American Labor* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2012).
- 17 Tai Neilson, "Unions in Digital Labour Studies: A Review of Information Society and Marxist Autonomist Approaches," *tripleC* 16, no. 2 (2018): 882–900; Richard Wells, "Connecting the Dots: Labor and the Digital Landscape," *Labor Studies in Working-Class History* 15, no. 3 (2018): 55–76; Nicole Cohen and Greig de Peuter, "Write, Post, Unionize: Journalists and Self-Organization," *Notes from Below*, June 8, 2019, <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/write-post-unionize>; Nicole Cohen and Greig de Peuter, "'I Work at VICE Canada and I Need a Union': Organizing Digital Media," in *Labour under Attack: Anti-Unionism in Canada*, eds. Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2018), 114–28; Revati Prasad, "An Organized Workforce Is Part of Growing Up: Gawker and the Case for Unionizing Digital Newsrooms," *Communication, Culture & Critique*, March 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcz008>; Jennifer M. Proffitt, "Solidarity in the Newsroom? Media Concentration and Union Organizing: A Case Study from the Sunshine State," *Journalism*, June 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919860030>.
- 18 Melanie Simms and Jane Holgate, "Organising for What? Where Is the Debate on the Politics of Organising?," *Work, Employment & Society* 24, no. 1 (2010): 157–68, 158.
- 19 Simms and Holgate, "Organising for What?," 161.
- 20 Jane McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.
- 21 McAlevey, *No Shortcuts*, 201, 10.
- 22 Astra Taylor, "Against Activism," *The Baffler*, no. 30 (2016), <https://thebaffler.com/salvos/against-activism>.
- 23 Rick Fantasia, *Cultures of Solidarity: Consciousness, Action, and Contemporary American Workers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 132.
- 24 Statistics Canada, "5123—Journalists," National Occupational Classification 2011, 2018, accessed October 16, 2019, <http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb/p3VD.pl?Function=getVD&TVD=122372&CVD=122376&CPV=5123&CST=01012011&CLV=4&MLV=4>.
- 25 Tannara Yelland, presentation at "Remaking Game Work," public forum, Toronto Media Arts Centre, July 17, 2019.