# THE INVISIBLE ENEMY: REPRESENTING LABOUR IN A CORPORATE MEDIA ORDER

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## Abstract

Substantial research documents the central role of the U.S. media in delegitimising and marginalizing the labour movement. U.S. journalists cover labour only rarely, and then through the prism of a "public" interest frame that submerges class relations, privileges commodities over the workers who produce them, and implicitly supports capital over the workers whose actions threaten to (or do) disrupt the ordinary flow of commerce.

This coverage is deeply rooted in the patterns of thinking taught in academic journalism programs. Leading American journalism textbooks rarely suggest seeking information or comment from labour leaders or union members, even for stories in which unions would be deeply involved. When textbooks ask students to write articles about hiring freezes and lay-offs based solely on press releases or "notes" from news conferences by corporate officials, students are being taught a clear lesson about whose perspective matters.

Journalism textbooks largely ignore the vast majority of the population – those who must work for a living. Workers and their unions exist only on the margins, as a disruptive force that inconveniences the general public. That reporters trained in this way go on to ignore labour concerns and perspectives in their own reporting is hardly surprising.

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Organised labour around the world is in crisis, as domestic capital and transnational financial institutions pursue a wide range of neo-liberal economic and social policies. Unions have lost ground in terms of the proportion of workers belonging to unions and the influence they wield in decision-making processes – but more critically, they have lost much of their ideological legitimacy. Critical publics (including even many union members) have been taught to see labour unions as special interest groups representing relatively narrow interests distinct from or even opposed to the "public interest." Many factors have contributed to this, ranging from the entrenchment of a commercialised media sector (and the concomitant decline of public media) to a program of professional education that trains journalists to exclude working-class voices from their reports.

A substantial body of scholarly research documents the central role of media framing devices and the allocation of journalistic resources in delegitimising and marginalizing the labour movement. These patterns of representation are now deeply embedded in journalistic working practices and professional ideology, taught to aspiring journalists in the classroom and reinforced throughout their careers. While there is no standardised journalism curriculum in the United States, journalism textbooks largely inhabit a common ideological perspective (Brennen 2000). American textbooks have been described as "the backbone of almost every college course" (Besser, Stone and Nan 1999, 4), reflecting their field's dominant paradigms, structuring the agenda of many courses, and modelling journalism practices and ideology for many students. This article, then, analyzes representations of labour found in the textbooks used in American collegiate journalism programs in order to uncover the professional norms that prevent labour's voices from being heard. Finally, the article briefly addresses contemporary debates within the labour movement over how best to meet the movement's communication needs.

## Hostile Coverage, Critical Absences

Labour activists and sympathetic scholars have long been critical of the anti-labour bias found in what they termed the "hired press," often establishing their own media outlets in an attempt to bring their views and activities to broader publics (Bekken 1993). Studies of media coverage of industrial conflict consistently find that the media cover these struggles through frames that delegitimise the labour movement. Hoerder (1983) has documented the *New York Times*' one-sided coverage of labour disputes in the 1870s and 1880s. In the 1920s, Upton Sinclair concluded that "whenever it comes to a 'show-down' between labor and capital, the press is openly or secretly for capital" (n.d., 346). Douglas noted that "labor stories and editorials are written too often with hysteria rather than reason" (1947, 7), attributing biased and incomplete labour coverage to journalists' ignorance, incompetence, and fear of retaliation from advertisers.

Writing from his prison cell, Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1926) voiced a view widely held in labour circles when he described journalists as mere hirelings, cogs in an industrial enterprise which "perfect[s], correct[s] and organiz[es] each tale, making it as coherent ... as possible." While some journalists deliberately misrepresented events, Vanzetti added, most simply passed along the stories fed them by the authorities. But whatever the explanation, the result was the same: a collective panic in which "being 'Italian,' 'red,' and 'slacker' were synonyms of [the] capacity

to commit crimes; nay, when they were hideous crimes in themselves."

Recent scholarship confirms these observations. Puette's (1992) analysis of a wide range of media forms, from television to newspaper comic strips, concluded that the media portray unions as a divisive social force, undemocratic and corrupt, which protect unproductive workers and create conflict-ridden workplaces unable to compete in the global marketplace. Schmidt's study of four decades of *New York Times* labour coverage notes that contemporary reporting practices and norms:

> *increase the opportunity for selective and biased reporting of union news. The news media prefer reporting dramatic events and/or events involving personalities and political elites. ... Media stories increasingly continue to support a view of unions as an economically disruptive force broadly threatening the public interest* (Schmidt 1996).

Adhering to professional norms of objectivity, the news media rarely openly assert such a position outside their editorial pages. Instead, journalists typically tell labour stories through the prism of a "public" interest that views labour issues from the standpoint of the consumer (Martin 2004). This stance submerges issues of political activity and class relations, privileges commodities over the workers who produce them, and implicitly supports capital over the workers whose actions threaten to (or do) disrupt the ordinary flow of commerce.

Operating within this frame, journalists feel little obligation to report on the actual issues involved in a labour dispute. Even the basic facts are often wrong, taken straight from management press releases without any fact checking or attempt at balance, as the journalist rushes to the heart of the matter: the impact on the inconvenienced consumer. Thus, in 1989 the *New York Times* and other media outlets reported that Eastern Airlines baggage handlers "averaged $45,000 a year," even though a review of their contract would have quickly established that wages topped out at $31,000 ("Editors vs. Eastern Strikers" 1989, 13). During a 1993 flight attendants' strike against American Airlines, television correspondents reported management claims that half the attendants were crossing picket lines (95 percent joined the walk-out). Management threats to fire the strikers were taken at face value, even though this was illegal. The millions of dollars paid out to executives who claimed the airline could not afford to pay the attendants a living wage were not mentioned. Such facts were incidental to what journalists saw as the "real" story: stranded passengers (Martin 2004). Even in countries where labour coverage remains more institutionalised, management views are over-represented, while workers are typically interviewed for local colour, if at all (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1982). Still, the United Steel Workers had great difficulty securing U.S. news coverage of its struggle against Ravenswood Aluminum, but was more successful placing the story in European newspapers (where Ravenswood's financier lives, and where journalists see labour as more newsworthy). The union finally resorted to purchasing newspaper advertisements to publicise its victory in the dispute (Juravich and Bronfenbrenner 1999).

Every empirical study of labour coverage has concluded that it is generally superficial and hostile, and increasingly rare. While unions have long complained bitterly of misrepresentation and media bias, the labour beat was once a staple of urban journalism. The *Chicago Tribune* ran an average of nearly five labour stories a day in 1910, rising to more than six in 1920 before plummeting to one and a half

items a day in 1930. The story count increased slightly in 1940, to three items per day, but most were only a few paragraphs long (Bekken 1996). Every major newspaper had at least one labour reporter, often hired from the ranks of the unions they covered. As late as the 1920s, Carroll Binder moved from writing for labour newspapers to a position on the *Chicago Daily News,* where he often covered labour stories, backing up the paper's main labour reporter. But in 1947, the *News* hired an "objective" labour reporter who refused to join the Newspaper Guild, sympathised with strike-breakers, and condemned news workers who were reluctant to put in long, unpaid hours on the job (Bekken 1998).

The decline in labour coverage accelerated sharply in the years following World War II, well in advance of the decline in union strength often cited to justify the change. Although most U.S. newspapers today publish a business section, only a half-dozen employ even a single labour reporter. When striking miners occupied a Virginia coal-processing plant in September 1989, the story was not covered by the *New York Times* or the three major television networks, and rated just one sentence in *USA Today*. In contrast, the Soviet miners' strike a few months before got extensive coverage, including interviews with striking miners and an ABC news segment contrasting the living standards of Soviet bosses and coal miners (Tasini 1990). When Teamsters' president Ron Carey was removed from office for misappropriating union funds (he was subsequently found not guilty in federal court), one newspaper suggested that the union "consider disbanding" while only a handful of reports included any comment from union members. Instead, reporters talked to other reporters, ignoring the real issues involved in the long rank-and-file struggle to reform the Teamsters in favour of discussing the impact on the union's battered public image (Jackson 1998).

Labour coverage has become increasingly critical, portraying unions as socially unresponsive, undemocratic, or crime-ridden (all of which can be true, but is rarely the focus of stories about business). When Westbrook Pegler exposed the organised crime ties of two prominent union officials, he shaped his coverage of the scandal to tar the entire American Federation of Labor – establishing a trope that remains a leading media frame for labour coverage to this day – focusing on the corruption of these union officials while ignoring the businessmen who had bribed them to control their work forces and sign sweetheart deals (Witwer 2003). By the 1970s, Freeman and Medoff (1979) found, half (51 percent) of the space devoted to unions in the leading U.S. newsmagazines, *Newsweek* and *Time*, was unfavourable, up from 34 percent in the 1950s.

More recently, a study of 1990s labour coverage in the *Chicago Tribune* found that unions were practically invisible in the newspaper (one of the few in the United States which still had a labour beat reporter), with just 386 stories appearing in a 10-year period directly related to unions (Bruno 2003). More than three-fourths of those articles were found to be biased against unions. (The *Tribune's* labour reporter disputed the report, saying he publishes some 200 articles a year, though most focus on more general workplace issues and do not necessarily mention unions at all.)

Similarly, Schmidt's (1996) study of *New York Times* labour coverage found a sharp decline in the total number of articles published, from more than 220 a year in 1946 to fewer than 30 in 1985. Meanwhile, the patterns of coverage shifted to an

almost exclusive focus on major strikes and contract disputes where some kind of public intervention seemed likely (even as the number of major strikes was declining), with declining (though always modest) attention to union charitable, political and educational activities, or other efforts directed less at their own members' immediate self-interest than at broader social issues such as union support for and involvement in the civil rights movement.

Former *New York Times* labour reporter William Serrin notes that labour reporting has long been devalued. When he started on the beat, the *Times* assigned one and a half reporters to the beat, compared to more than 40 for the business section. When he left, it was several months before he was replaced – again by a single reporter, though staffing on the business section continues to expand. Today, Serrin notes, the country's leading papers "are giving much less space and importance to the labor movement and the workplace than they have in the past. Many American newspapers and magazines give almost no coverage to labor. Television is worse" (1992, 16).

Labor news has practically disappeared from television newscasts, even as entire cable networks devoted to business news proliferate. As a result, workers are practically invisible on television – even on U.S. public television, there is ten times as much programming about the concerns of economic and social elites than programming devoted to workers (Kalaski 2002). Goldman and Rajagopal's (1991) detailed study of television news coverage of the 1977-78 U.S. coal strike found that while the networks regularly aired images of angry miners throughout the dispute, they rarely reported on why the miners were upset or what they were seeking. CBS, for example, closely followed the rituals of objectivity, giving roughly as much time to miners and their union as to the coal operators association and the government (which had ordered an end to the strike). But, though ostensibly impartial, the issues were presented in terms that ultimately privileged the employers, creating "balance" by portraying the miners in battle not against the operators but against the public. Miners were shown, but their story was not told, and indeed could not be told within the constraints of the prevailing journalistic ideology defining what constitutes news, whose ideas are newsworthy, and how information should be presented.

## Professionalisation and News Routines

In an era where fewer than one in eight U.S. workers belong to unions, most people know labour unions primarily through media representations – representations that capture only a small part of the range of union activity (Keegan 1987). In the aftermath of Pegler's exposes in 1939 and 1940, nearly three-fourths of respondents told pollsters that "many labor union leaders are racketeers," sentiments that undermined union organizing campaigns and laid a foundation for new legislative restrictions on labour unions (Witwer 2003).

"Journalists have never been particularly comfortable covering workers," noted former United Food and Commercial Workers publications director Allen Zack:

> *Covering Michael Milken is so much more glamorous than covering the workers whose jobs he's destroyed through junk-bond deals. It is a bias that says, "If these people had just gone to college, like me, they wouldn't have this*

*problem." It is a bias reflected in a value structure that says $10 an hour is too much for a clerk or a packing house worker, but too little for a newspaper reporter* (1989, personal communication).

As journalism becomes a respectable profession, fewer journalists come from working-class backgrounds. Most are well educated, better paid than the average employee (even if journalists' compensation remains well below the levels paid to comparably educated "professionals"), and live in middle-class neighbourhoods. No longer a participant in social struggles or an independent interpreter of events, the professional journalist dispassionately conveys the pronouncements of social elites as a relatively passive transmission belt in a commodified industrial process (Bekken 1998). Too often, McChesney notes, "professional journalism internalizes the notion that business is the proper steward of society, so that the stunning combination of ample flattering attention to the affairs of business in the news with a virtual blackout of labor coverage is taken as 'natural'" (1999, 50).

A century ago, labour journalism fit within a news model in which editors attempted to offer a comprehensive account of the day's events. News columns were crammed with short reports that might not merit substantial play, but which fit a journalistic form that assumed, on the one hand, that readers would rather read a little about a wide variety of subjects than longer, more interpretive pieces, and on the other that the newspaper had an obligation to cover all the news of the day – a journalistic practice that survives today only in the business and sports pages, which assume a more committed, engaged readership (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). In addition to stand-alone coverage of more dramatic events, most papers ran labour columns largely devoted to brief accounts of union meetings and other routine events, offering a fairly comprehensive, if not exactly dramatic, account of union activities.

Labour stories were traditionally covered by labour beat reporters who were fairly knowledgeable about the union movement, and could share their expertise and contacts with other reporters. Today few news staffs include journalists with such expertise – instead, labour news is covered, when it is covered at all, either by the business or general assignment desks (Mort 1987). Only two major U.S. news organisations now have full-time labour reporters (Alter 2003). The common practice of placing labour news in the business section not only limits the number (and character) of readers who will see these reports, it also reinforces perceptions of unions as a predominantly economic actor – and, in the context of business reporting, as intrinsically threatening to the normal operations of the economy. Journalists' widespread and uncritical reliance on explanatory frames such as the Phillips Curve (which argues that low unemployment leads to higher wages and general price inflation), despite substantial research demonstrating that the theory is wrong, helps fuel perceptions of unions as special interests who make gains only at the expense of the general public (Martin 2004). A bevy of industry-supported economists and other "independent" experts reinforce the theme, which has long since become a "common sense" explanation that can be inserted into stories without any supporting attribution or evidence – or any space for sources who might debunk such myths.

Well-entrenched journalistic practices work against better labour coverage. As publishers seek upscale readers and advertiser-friendly content, scarce journalis-

tic resources have been redeployed to business and lifestyle sections which often appeal to only a small fraction of potential readers but nonetheless better support media companies' financial objectives. Journalists' lives are increasingly remote from those of the working class that still constitutes the bulk of potential audiences for most media, reducing the likelihood that labour stories will find advocates in news rooms and also breeding perceptions of unions as a special interest group. Changing patterns of news coverage have seen the disappearance of much of the "newspaper of record" round-ups to which much labour reporting was once relegated. Established newsworthiness criteria such as impact easily feed into the consumer frame, implicitly counterposing labour struggles to the public interest. Thus, in 1986 the *New York Times* began its coverage of a strike by AT&T workers by assuring telephone customers that they would experience no interruption in service (Mort 1987). Few labour figures command the sort of prominence our society affords to celebrities, millionaires and politicians. Labour, by and large, gets in the news only when it is embroiled in conflict – a frame easily twisted by adroit public relations flacks to position unions as a disruptive anti-social force.

## Textbooks and Ruling-Class Ideology

The labour movement's difficulties securing the type of coverage it believes it deserves are not accidental – they are deeply rooted in the patterns of thinking taught in academic journalism programs and enforced in news organisations. A study of 32 American journalism textbooks (Bekken 2000) found that they rarely suggest seeking information or comment from labour leaders or union members, except in the context of business reporting (where labour is typically buried in a long list of supplemental sources). A labour perspective is missing even in stories in which unions would typically be deeply involved such as a mine explosion that is the subject of a richly descriptive, but completely unsourced, three-paragraph excerpt from a contemporary news account reprinted in Fedler et al. (1997). On-the-job deaths discussed in Itule & Anderson's (2000) spot report has no evident sourcing, while The Missouri Group (1999) recommends company officials as sources for covering industrial accidents and their discussion of strikes focuses on the inconvenience to customers. Discussion of retraining programs for displaced workers in Leiter, Harriss and Johnson's (2000) sample story quotes former Vice President Albert Gore and an industry association representative, but not any workers or union officials.

Fedler's omission of the United Mine Workers in his discussion of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*'s Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the 1947 Centralia explosion is particularly noteworthy, as the actual coverage prominently featured union complaints that the government was not enforcing mine safety laws (including a letter sent by UMW local officials months before the explosion pleading with state inspectors to "save our lives"; three of the four signers died in the blast), and 400,000 miners joined a week-long protest strike which kept the disaster on front pages well into the following month (St. *Louis Post-Dispatch* 1947; Wilensky 1947).

Many textbooks present lay-offs either as writing exercises to illustrate how to cover a story, but the workers affected are typically invisible. Yopp and McAdams (2002) and Itule and Anderson (2000) suggest covering lay-offs entirely from information provided by the company, while Lanson and Fought (1999) suggest adding

an economist and a real estate agent (but not a worker) for context. Laakaniemi (1995) offers the lay-off of 200 auto parts workers as an example of how to rework a press release to focus on the most newsworthy angle; there is no suggestion of talking to workers or union officials to produce a more complete story. Whitaker et al. (2000) do use a laid-off auto worker to illustrate the *Wall Street Journal* lead, but without any suggestion of talking to the union that almost certainly represents him to get a broader perspective.

To judge from these textbooks, the labour movement is simply not important – unlike businessmen, local politicians and police, it evidently does not meet the established criteria for newsworthiness. Labour, by and large, gets in the news only when it is embroiled in conflict, and even then the resulting coverage rarely captures workers' perspectives. When a hypothetical reporter is surprised by the outbreak of a strike by city workers, the textbook authors' solution is not to cultivate union workers or officials as sources, but rather to go out for beer and pizza with city council members after their meetings (Mitchell and West 1996).

Textbook authors' predilection for single-sourced stories inevitably serves to marginalise and exclude union sources. When textbooks ask students to write articles about hiring freezes and lay-offs based solely on reproduced press releases or "notes" from press conferences by corporate or government officials, students are being taught a clear lesson about whose perspective matters. Shaw et al.'s reporting text suggests that government records and officials are often "the best place to look for insight into a labor union or a labor dispute" (1997, 199) but does not have even a single sentence encouraging reporters to talk to unions or union workers for any story. They do criticise the *New York Times* for running a series on the human costs of corporate downsizing without turning to mainstream economists who could have "explained" that downsizing is essential to a competitive economy.

Unions are nearly invisible in most texts, even where the authors seem to have made a deliberate attempt to include a more diverse array of stories and subjects. Aldrich's (1999) pioneering textbook devoted to diversity in news coverage does not so much as mention the many unions and other groups active in immigrant and minority communities or working around issues of women's rights. Even though minority communities are more heavily working class than the broader society, the only labour-related issues mentioned are employment discrimination and the lack of diversity in newsrooms. Similarly, Scanlan's (2000) discussion of diversity in sourcing alerts students to issues of disability, homophobia, racism and sexism, as well as the problems faced by non-English speakers, but completely ignores class.

In most textbooks, students are as likely to encounter members of the Kiwanis or other social clubs as members of labour unions; far more attention and emphasis is given to covering the activities and views of corporate (and government) officials than to covering the multitudes who keep their enterprises running. Labor appears mainly in chapters on covering business, and then primarily as a source for divergent viewpoints rather than as something worthy of coverage in its own right. Even authors who attempt to incorporate labour into their texts have difficulty escaping the hegemonic discourse. Although Lanson and Fought (1999) urge reporters to look for people who live the story – offering an example of how interviews with union workers enabled a reporter to uncover the reason behind the

Challenger space shuttle explosion – they still place heavy emphasis on official sources. A chapter titled "Working" stresses the drama and tension of the beat, but despite the name focuses more on business than on labour – at one point suggesting "quotes from corporate executives [to] humanize and explain their role in laying off workers" (278).

In what contexts do unions typically appear? Braden and Roth say "strikers want more money," (1997, 145) while the teachers' union demands (and wins) pay hikes the superintendent insists the district cannot afford. For Hutchison (1996), unions cause a $1 million budget shortfall for a school district by winning a 2.3 percent pay hike (the school superintendent is the sole source), threaten to strike (no source), and strike even though management offered to meet their demands. Although his text tells reporters to talk to union leaders and to the rank and file, only management is cited in these examples.

Unions are sometimes mentioned in passing in more benign contexts – exhibiting solidarity to illustrate subject-verb agreement (Yopp and McAdams 2002), providing tips on highway safety (Gaines 1998), and influencing local government (Missouri Group 2001). But more typically, unions are not considered reliable sources even for information on their own members' wages and working conditions. The Missouri Group (2002) uses a press release from a teachers' union (complaining that teachers are paid less than dog catchers) to illustrate the problems of relying on news releases. But they immediately follow the text of the release with a deconstruction which challenges every factual assertion and interpretation in the release before offering a sample article which in its own way is every bit as biased as the press release they critique.

Melvin Mencher's (1999, 2000) popular textbooks use a few labour stories as samples. In the most substantial example, a chapter on story structure walks students through the process of covering a possible teachers strike. The word "threat" appears three times in the sample story; in a follow-up, the "possibility of a strike" "loomed" over the schools (Mencher 2000, 135-136). A sample story on excessive overtime by city workers cites a union official saying the real problem is inadequate staffing levels. Workers are far more common in Mencher's texts than are unions, which do not appear at all in several situations where they would almost certainly have been appropriate sources: a 15 percent pay hike for city employees, a pay freeze for teachers, pesticides suspected of sickening farm workers, child labour, an investigative piece on whether tax breaks produce the promised jobs, a mine explosion, a hospital closing, unsafe schools, occupational safety enforcement, teacher lay-offs, steelworker pensions, and problems in local schools. Mencher's chapter on business reporting simply notes, "If the newspaper or station has no labor reporter, the business reporter covers labor-management relations and the activities of labor unions" (2000, 573). And despite his evident belief that workers' stories are important, in the final analysis Mencher's textbooks give labour the same casual treatment that that quote suggests.

Another leading text, by The Missouri Group, encourages students to leave the office and talk to people on their beats, including workers and local labour leaders, "for the other side of many business stories" (2002, 342) and for stories on working conditions. But unionists make only fleeting appearances in the book – a union president estimating how many teachers have joined a strike, in video of a hospi-

tal strikers' picket line, and in the teachers' union press release discussed above. Stein and Paterno (1998) mention in passing that some larger papers have specialised reporters to cover labour, housing and similar beats, but completely ignore labour sources in a succession of sample stories covering women in Chicago construction jobs, employment discrimination, potential lay-offs, and a rally (held at a lumber mill) protesting logging in Northern California. Leiter, Harriss and Johnson write labour "can be one of the most significant of a newspaper's beats" (2000, 391) but spend as many words discussing how to cover weddings as labour.

Although most textbooks that cover the subject at all do remind students that labour encompasses much more than strikes, strikes dominate the handful of examples where unions appear (Bekken 2000). Two of Laakanieimi's (1995) three references to unions are about strikes. Rich (2000) has only two brief references to unions – one an auto strike, the other a reference to The Newspaper Guild as a source for reporters' earnings; she gives much more extensive attention to the animal rights movement. Four of six references to labour in The Missouri Group's (2001) *Telling the Story* are about strikes.

Advanced reporting textbooks follow similar patterns. Lovell's (1993) public affairs reporting textbook barely mentions unions in its chapter on business coverage (they appear only in the glossary). It urges reporters to be careful to avoid the anti-business attitude which allegedly pervades such reporting and suggests sourcing patterns which rely entirely on corporate officials, financial analysts and government regulators. Schulte and Dufresne (1994) do not mention labour sources in their chapter on business and consumerism, but include one of only two chapters on covering the workforce discovered in this review of textbooks. That chapter argues that labour deserves coverage just as business does; it offers a brief overview of the labour movement and encourages reporters to seek out both official and unofficial labour sources. Although the authors cite labour sources far more extensively than most textbooks, their examples offer a somewhat distorted image. A sample article from 1992, when California's public sector unions were battling unilateral pay and budget cuts and workers received IOUs instead of pay checks, presents public employee unions as the only listed example of "interest groups that are rapidly replacing an alienated citizenry as the effective rulers" (Schulte and Dufresne 1994, 333) of that state. Other references to labour focus on "threatened" and wildcat strikes, picket-line violence, organizing defeats, and political lobbying. Overall, the issues which prompted those strikes are ignored.

If Schulte and Dufresne offer more balanced coverage of labour than most textbooks, Lanson and Stephens (1994) give labour and management equal play in their (nearly obligatory) chapter on economic coverage. They note that workers are both less affluent and more numerous than the corporate executives featured in business coverage, but receive far less coverage. Yet the beat is important:

> *The labor beat ... offers a chance to report on some of the consequences of business and economic decisions. It looks at how people spend their eight or so hours each day on the job, at struggles to organize and protect workers, and at the periodic battles between employers and employees over wages and conditions* (Lanson and Stephens 1994, 387).

Lanson and Stephens urge business reporters to be sure to include labour and consumer voices in their coverage, and labour reporters not to be content with

simply covering union leaders. They suggest talking to office workers, store clerks and factory hands to get a "bottoms up" view of labour, whether unionised or not. They also stress the importance of covering union activities such as health plans, community involvement and political efforts. Labour examples are relatively common throughout their text – unions seek a first contract, campaign against unemployment, strike, secure severance benefits for laid-off workers, organise, criticise public officials, offer useful perspectives on education issues, and call for better pay.

But such treatment is the exception to an entrenched pattern of marginalisation and exclusion. Students carry the blind spot towards labour inculcated in their academic training into newsrooms across the country. Editors and publishers have slashed the number of labour reporters, even while proclaiming a formal commitment to more thorough coverage of people's working lives. Reporters and editors do not look to the labour movement for news – they wait for strikes, or include labour in discussions of the "special interests" said to dominate the political system and the schools. Several years ago the AFL-CIO's Committee on the Evolution of Work concluded that unions needed to address their representation in news reports:

> *Too often, only "bad" news about organized labor gets publicized; successes are ignored, and efforts made by unions to further the interests of workers and the general public go unnoticed. ... Most non-union workers obtain their information about unions from the media. Too often, reporters are uninformed about unions* (1985, 20-22).

They recommended that unions respond with public relations and advertising campaigns and other image-building efforts.

But despite substantial investments in public relations and other communications campaigns, generally replicating the professional communications model that dominates the commercial media, public knowledge about unions continues to decline (Glass 2003). Faced with this situation, some labour communicators have suggested the need for a radically different approach: rebuilding a grassroots network of labour media that give voice to (and are often produced by) rank-and-file workers:

> *An organizing model of communications needs, at least, to think about communication, education, and organizing at the same time. It begins with respect for and the desire to listen to workers, not simply to hear where they're at as targets for messages, but because they are often the best crafters of their own messages. We might do better providing workers with a "voice at work" by giving them the microphone and getting out of the way* (Glass 2003, 10).

Glass suggests the labour movement look to the example of the Independent Media Centers, creating a network of Labor Media Centers to supplement more traditional public relations approaches. Such centres could reinvigorate a rather decrepit labour press, offering facilities and training to support the production of newsletters, web sites, an online labour news service, and radio and video programming. Kling (2003) discusses several recent initiatives in this direction, stressing the need to explicitly challenge the "deep anti-worker values ... that are so part of the ether of our cultural existence that they appear as invisibly as common sense,"

as well as joining in broader media reform campaigns such as those proposed by McChesney (1999).

While many scholars have contributed to the literature documenting patterns of media coverage that largely exclude labour concerns and perspectives, too few have contributed to developing the movement's capacity to effectively challenge them. Even in their immediate environs, little attention has been paid to the ways in which journalism educators (re)produce labour's invisibility in their daily activities in the classroom. In recent decades, textbook authors have worked to remove sexist language and to address issues of cultural sensitivity. Authors have addressed the convergence of media forms, and added discussion of areas (such as religion and consumer news) not traditionally central to the journalism curriculum. But, whether reflecting the decline in labour coverage in newspapers generally or their own biases, today's textbooks continue to largely ignore the vast majority of the population – those who must work for a living. Workers and their unions exist only on the margins of most journalism textbooks, and then typically only as a disruptive force that inconveniences the general public. That reporters trained in this way go on to ignore labour concerns and perspectives in their own reporting is hardly surprising.

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