



Book Review

A Book about Hope

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Nicole S Cohen and Greig de Peuter, *New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists*, Routledge, March 24, 2020, [ISBN 978-1-138-32711-5] Pp.118

If I had to summarise this book in a word, it would be: Hope. *New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists*, is a document stringing together the recent wave of unionisation by digital journalists in the United State of America and Canada. It is common for books, theoretically based on critical political economy, to analyse a particular media critically and suggest either a restructuring of media systems and/or regain control of work processes by the workers. Very rarely do we see academic work focussed on regaining control of work processes through unionisation. The authors, Greig de Peuter, Associate professor of Communication at Wilfrid Laurier University and Nicole Cohen, Associate Professor at the Institute of Communication, Culture, Information, and Technology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, have been well known in the field of media labour and present to the reader a smooth following account of unionising at media outlets such as Vice, Buzzfeed, MTV News, and so on. But this story about struggles and successes is narrated through the accounts by the journalists themselves, while the authors weave these accounts with their needles of critical theory and history, resulting in a robust rigorous tapestry of the A-Z of unionising in the media industry.

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Three specific reasons make this book outstanding. First, is the focus and rationale of the book itself. Although the book is part of the Disruptions: Studies in Digital journalism series of Routledge, the authors do not stop at merely evaluating the disruption caused by union drives among digital journalistic spaces, but argue that the future of journalism depends upon the organising of labour.

Second, is the organising of the book. It is divided into six chapters each focussing on a specific moment in the unionisation process - Motivation, Activation, Mobilisation, Recognition, Negotiation and Transformation. This transforms this book from an account of the media labour movement at a particular historical present, within a specific geography, to an instruction manual for others to follow, and a guide containing the possible constraints and roadblocks which might be faced during the unionisation process, along with examples of how the digital journalists overcame them. It is this exact nature of the book that gave me a sense of hope. Every chapter enhances and elicits this emotion further, till the end where the reader feels energised and hopeful not only about the future of journalism but the media industry as a whole. To illustrate, in the first chapter on *Motivation*, the authors state that the process of unionization was initiated not only because of frustrations caused due to the working conditions, but broader goals such as envisioning journalism as a sustainable career, bringing about more editorial independence and integrity and ensuring better access. Further, the focus on employee relationships and the subsequent class consciousness, and realization of 'journalists as worker' in the chapter *Activation*, not only provides the required prerequisites for unionization, but also throws light on the need for research and debates on journalists as workers (especially in the South Asian region), and not as isolated warriors of democracy. On a personal note, this book made me face my media students more confidently, for I knew, there was hope for them, and it would be my responsibility to inform and teach them the process of regaining control of journalistic/media work. The concluding chapter on *Transformation*, throws light on values we need to work towards (as shown by the unions) such as sustainability, accessibility, equity and integrity, which are essential for envisioning a brighter future for journalism and overhauling the current media ecosystem.

Third, the book is steered by real-life accounts and quotes by the journalists themselves. This lends a documentary-style to the book, which enables deeper connections between the reader and the subject matter at hand. The in-depth interview of organising journalists provides the authors not only nuances of the unionising process but also subtle yet powerful moments of resistance, cooperation and community building. It lends voice and space to the organising journalists which are vital, something journalists in my own research have complained stating that “we (journalists) report about everybody's problems, but we don't have a space to talk about our own problems”. Further, it throws light on journalists' experiences on the unionising process especially the ones who were sceptical of unionising and how their perspective changed throughout the process. Neoliberal ideologies have become ‘the normal’, and union movements, especially in Indian journalism, have been shoved into the annals of history, and are seen as a hindrance; these perspectives lend a chance to reevaluate notions about media regulation, media unions and the dire need for both.

The only possible drawback one may see is the book's focus on the USA and Canada. But this is negligible, as the book offers vocabulary and a roadmap to researchers and journalists to search for such movements in our own geographies, and/or start unionising drives in our own media backyards and ecosystems. The book is at the cusp of academia and journalistic writing, lending itself to a wide variety of readers.

At a time when journalists are being laid off in hundreds across the country (Sam, 2020) an account of resistance and regaining power is necessary for both, being a call for action and as a symbol of hope, and possibilities. I would recommend this as a must-read for all students of media and communication, journalists, and media workers at all levels and stages of the information economy. And for all of us who are involved in media labour research, this book also signals new vistas for us to explore, fuels us with hope and most importantly, encourages us to act.

References

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