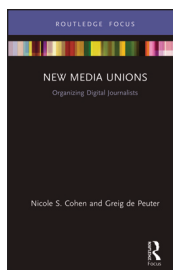


## Review



**New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists.** By Nicole S. Cohen, Greig de Peuter. UK: Routledge. 2020. 100 pp. ISBN 9781138327115

In *New Media Unions: Organizing Digital Journalists*, Cohen & de Peuter tell a compelling story about a wave of 60 recent successful union drives in digital media (both traditional media in digital form and new media start-ups) in North America growing into a full-blown movement. The stated purpose of the book is to act as a guide for further unionization within digital media and adjacent communication fields such as the digital cultural industries and the tech sector.

The research behind the story is substantive. The authors draw on a total of 49 in-depth interviews with 48 people, including some group and follow-up interviews, as well as media coverage, observation of union social media accounts, union-produced documents, and collective bargaining agreements. A rigorous literature review is reflected in the notes section of each chapter and the nine-page, up-to-date bibliography.

The organization of the book follows the process of unionization, from the factors motivating journalists to consider forming or joining a union, through the phases of organization, mobilization, becoming recognized as a union (in the U.S.) or certified (in Canada), negotiating a first contract, to the post-contract period. The 60 outlets that have unionized are listed, and there is a useful index. This structure is one of the major strengths of this work; it is logical, helps the book to flow as a story, and it is easy for the main target audience of potential new organizers to find needed information. Within each section, the writing is clear, engaging, and well-organized.

The reader is walked through a collective story about the organizing of these new media unions, in a manner that frequently and effectively relies on using quotes from research participants. For example, to illustrate the emergence of class consciousness, an organizer from Vice Canada is quoted on the disconnect between their \$15-an-hour wage and a recent purchase by Vice's CEO of a CND \$23 million mansion. Potential organizers will find detailed information about challenges and strategies on a phase-by-phase basis. They also will likely find their personal reflec-

tions, local workplace conversations, hopes, and concerns reflected in the examples and quotes, leading them to the analysis and strategies required for organizing. Moreover, the examples and list of successful unions are a source of possible contacts for potential organizers and other interested parties. The book is full of useful details such as which parent unions these new unions joined, the roles of the parent union vis-à-vis the local shop, specific organizing strategies, typical anti-union strategies employed in this sector, and how to counter them.

One common bargaining strategy is pointing to what others have achieved. In this sense, this book is useful in presenting the most commonly bargained items: compensation (i.e., pay and benefits, particularly healthcare), equity, and control. The authors also highlight the important social role of union organizing as a means of advancing diversity in hiring, the impact of minimum salaries in reducing economic disparity, improving workplace culture, and democratizing the workplace. Negotiable items that are specific to digital media that have been negotiated, some of which are relevant to other communication fields, include rights to continue freelance work, intellectual property rights, and editorial integrity (e.g., the right to refuse to write sponsored content).

The challenges, real dangers, and limitations of unionization are acknowledged along with the benefits. For example, after a successful union drive, Gawker was shut down and subsequently sold at a bargain price. Other outlets threatened shut-downs that did not occur. The authors note that it is too early to assess the impact of these new unions as many had only recently completed contracts at the time of writing. The impact of ongoing mergers and acquisitions in digital media on journalism, as well as on these unions, is unknown. Another limitation is the book's one-sided advocacy approach. The authors appropriately acknowledge, but do not address, other potential solutions to the crisis in journalism such as public media and/or worker-owned collectives.

One critique: the authors present union organizing as critical to the future of journalism, an antidote to the crisis of journalism in recent years that has resulted from media concentration and competition for advertising revenue from digital platforms such as Facebook and Google. While the benefits of union organizing for the journalists and journalism as a career are clear, union organizing per se is not likely to impact the trend toward media concentration, so this perspective seems overly optimistic.

The authors emphasize continuity in change. The tactics, challenges, and parent unions of traditional media outlets are evident in digital media organizing, while the digital media outlets have often employed new tactics, reflecting digital culture, such as individuals announcing intention to vote to unionize via twitter in contrast with traditional secrecy, and a Slack work stoppage.

Beyond practical guidance for potential organizers of more new media unions, this book serves as an important and unique case study, documenting a moment

of emerging class consciousness and effective organization in one of the increasingly precarious workplaces of the gig economy. As an historical example of how and why class consciousness emerges, this is a much more accessible work for contemporary readers than Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and many other works of political economy. The start-up culture in which people see themselves as freelancers, permalancers, or entrepreneurs rather than workers, lucky to have a job even if the pay is inadequate and the hours outrageous, is not unique to digital media. It is all too common and, as such, one is encouraged by seeing this movement emerge in the digital media that are most likely to be accessed by precarious, young workers. This book would be an excellent and welcome addition to any undergraduate or graduate course on journalism, communication, or labour studies, and is recommended for new graduates, communication workers, and traditional labour unions for ideas on how to connect and support new movements.

Heather Morrison, *University of Ottawa*