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## Management Recommendations for Working with Journalism and New Media Unions

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## Introduction

Union organization is increasingly of interest in the media today, particularly in the case of union organization efforts in New York state. Union organization efforts at an Amazon facility in Staten Island (Kantor and Weise 2022) and a Starbucks location in Buffalo (Scheiber 2022) have received the most attention. Considering this trend, the goal of this paper is to explore the ways union membership impacts media businesses overall through the lens of micro, macro, and macro levels of organizational behavior.

Over the time period of 2015-2019, over 63 media outlets have held successful union drives, including such media sources as *BuzzFeed*, *CBSN*, *Slate*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New Yorker*, *Huffington Post*, *Vice*, *Vox* and business outlets *FastCompany*, *Fortune*, and *Ziff Davis* (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). Media unionization will provide the case example to better understand the impacts of unionization on businesses at multiple scales. In particular, the role of journalists as employees is considered in the context of large, established media organizations and in start-up new media organizations. The following comparison of these two sectors will guide the development of managerial recommendations for leaders to consider when working with unionized labor or when confronted with a union organization effort at their workplace.

The main thesis of this paper is that members in white collar businesses act as informal groups within organizations and union membership leads to: 1) more effective, efficient employees, 2) greater workplace satisfaction, and 3) consequently, potentially more effective organizations in terms of efficiencies. While prior research on 'blue collar' labor is well-established within the academic field of industrial relations, studies on 'white collar' unionization is understudied in the context of organizational behavior. Therefore, this paper provides context of 'white collar' unionization using the example of journalism and new media businesses.

## Exploring Journalism and New Media Unions through Organizational Behavior Context

### *Micro-level*

Why would an employee want to join a union at their workplace? This is a question with many explanations when taking into consideration the varieties of organizations that employ unions. An examination of unionization at the micro-level can greatly inform answers to this question. According to Ashkanasy & Dorris (2017), micro-level analysis concerns six primary topics: "(1) diversity; (2) attitudes and job satisfaction; (3) personality and values; (4) emotions and moods; (5) perception and individual decision-making; and (6) motivation." The success of unionization efforts is greatly affected by employee characteristics in relation to each of these topics.

Most workers in the US would consider unionized labor as an element of the 'blue collar' workforce, most exemplified by media coverage of such as industrial labor unions as the UAW and their relation to the US car industry. However, many unions forming in recent years are in service sector employment (e.g., nursing, hospital workers, hotel workers) or in 'white collar' employment sectors such as in academia or in the media industry. In each of these cases, there are shared concerns amongst all of these unions, including salary compensation, pay raises, benefits packages, working conditions, and protection from dismissal without cause. In the case of journalism and new media unionization, the same concerns are included in the unionization

effort but also include demands for workplace protections such as from sexual harassment and greater efforts to diversify the workplace (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). In particular, the demands for workplace diversification appear relatively unique in the landscape of union organization.

These demands beg the question: *are journalism employees unique at the micro-level of organizational behavior?* The nature of the field and motivations of those who work in it appear to be so. Firstly, journalists work independently and often in a ‘freelance’ manner, being paid for the content they produce. In addition, media scholars have critiqued the devolution of journalism due to the ‘pay for clicks’ approach to the generation of news media content. While ‘pay for clicks’ is a pejorative description, it does capture the reality that the success of journalists and media content providers is often tied to metrics of readership as evidenced by Internet based measures of number of views, number of shares, and social media interaction, often directly with the journalist themselves via Twitter or other channels. The conclusion here is that journalists and media content providers are essentially independent agents and personally associated with their work products. Therefore, workplace motivation is intrinsically motivated and personal mastery of ‘craft’ is a shared goal for most in the journalism of profession.

In addition, journalism is known as a field with generally low financial compensation and stressful working conditions as evidenced by tight deadlines, critical supervisors (e.g., editors), and at times a critical or hostile response to their content by readership or Internet trolls. Journalists also often work in urban settings where low compensation makes basic life necessities as housing and transportation difficult. For example, the mismatch between low salaries and costs of living for journalists in New York and Los Angeles are cited as primary motivations for engaging in union organization (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). Despite low salary, journalists are known to take pride in their work and their field and make personal sacrifices for their careers. According to Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, most journalists would be working towards self-actualization, however, they are unable to pursue self-fulfillment needs as they are stuck trying to meet basic safety needs in the struggle to make ends meet. Therefore, organizations should consider what workplace compensation best suit employees motivated by dedication to their profession and in serving the public.

Journalist demands for greater workplace diversity in their union organization efforts demonstrates their shared values at the micro-level. While journalism is known to be overwhelmingly white dominated, journalists are highly concerned about increasing diversity. Recent interviews with journalists concerning union organization demonstrate the level of concern over lack of diversity. One New York City-based journalist described their workforce as “not a representative cross section of New York City” (Cohen & de Peuter 2020, p. 7). In addition, demands for greater workplace protections from workplace harassment, primarily sexual harassment, speaks to concerns for greater gender equity in the workplace. In many ways, these are evidence of workers with a degree of altruism, dedication to the profession, and left-leaning perspectives on how to best develop a workforce.

### ***Meso-level***

The meso-level of organizational behavior is concerned with how individuals in an organization form effective teams (Griffin et al. 2017). In the context of unionization, individual journalists

work together to form a team to first, create a union, and second to negotiate with management of their organization. The first phase of creation of a union is a difficult process as is referred to as 'organization.' The second phase is referred to as 'recognition' of the union by management and followed by 'negotiation' of a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with management leadership.

The process by which journalists move towards unionization is similar to the classic team formation process described by Tuckman (1965) as moving through stages of 'forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.' After the initial union forming phase is set in motion by a handful of organizers, the work of storming begins. In this case, efforts to have productive dialog on the benefits of unionization to the specific organization unionizing is critical. A recent article by NYC based journalist German Lopez (2019) provides an excellent example of team formation concerning unionization efforts. In his case at the media outlet *Vox*, he and other employees held on to preconceptions of union value and was initially against unionization in his organization.

However, Lopez's article traces his thought process and is representative of the dialog held on the value of unionization by most journalists. His influence on the storming process is best described by Myers and Lamm's (1976) conceptual schema approach to group attitude development. This approach is characterized by the importance of interpersonal comparisons and informational influence. The schema traces the concept of social motivation evident in comparing oneself to others which leads to cognitive foundations. Cognitive foundations lead to attitude change and eventually action commitment. In Lopez's case, he literally researched unionization and the potential value to journalists, especially in comparison of financial compensation, upward mobility, and the intrinsic value of unionization to reducing inequities in society as a whole. In the process of acquiring persuasive information and comparing the value of unions for oneself, Lopez demonstrated a move toward a cognitive foundation of unions value to both journalism and society, key elements of persuasion meeting journalist values. After tracing his attitude change on unionization, he later publishes a work at *Vox* sharing the information he had gathered to influence other journalists.

A key element of the team process is to gain the public support for unionization of respected leaders in the workplace like Lopez (Benton 2019). In the case of unionization at *Vox*, Lopez's article published through the outlet not only provided the coalition building necessary for pushing the unionization effort, it also became both rallying cry and supporting evidence for other unionization efforts across a spectrum of media organizations in the US (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). In the norming phase, once majority support is gained from employees, union organizers then move toward a vote to unionize and become recognized as a labor union by the US Department of Labor.

The performing phase is evident in the context of the negotiation phase of unionization in which union leadership meets with management to settle on a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). In many unions, negotiation is often lead by agents, professional negotiators who act on labor's behalf. However, most negotiations by journalist and new media unions are performed by committees of leaders directly from the workforce (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). The approach to bargaining used by most journalism and media is collective bargaining, an open process in which information is shared widely and frequently with co-workers. This approach is a key

element for gaining support, trust, and confidence in representative leadership. In addition, journalists are able to stay well informed with what to expect in the CBA so that they can make decisions on support in an open and effective way. In short, an open bargaining process most often leads to strong unions (aka ‘solidarity’) and trust in union leadership. A productive and civil negotiation with management can also lead to ‘win-win’ outcomes leading to satisfaction with the negotiating process on both sides (Brooks 2019). In addition, fair outcomes for the union side can lead to greater organizational commitment and in some cases, positive media coverage for management.

### ***Macro-level***

At the macro-level, the primary areas of assessment of organizations are in its organizational structure, climate, and culture (Ashkanasy & Dorris 2017). In terms of organizational structure, many journalism businesses are relatively flat structures with flexibility in working arrangements such as in working remotely and in reporting to editors. In general, journalists enjoy relative autonomy and workplace freedom in carrying out assignments as befits a profession relying on intrinsic motivation. While the organizational structure is relatively decentralized, journalists often struggle with the inability to make decisions on what stories they cover, beats they are assigned to, and the pressure to monitor public response to their content. Therefore, many media unions have pushed for ‘democratization’ and greater voice in the content and direction of the organization (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). Journalist unions have tried to increase power of workers in providing direction to management in CBAs.

In terms of organizational climate and culture, journalist unions have been concerned about workplace conditions and the perception of the organization which can deflate morale. As best exemplified by the unionization of *Slate*, many media organizations are left leaning in the first place and can be publicly embarrassed for hypocrisy in not providing appropriate working conditions for media employees. A strategy in the union process is to share content through media and social media channels that influences public perception of the organization to increase bargaining power in the negotiation or formation phases. Most journalists desire to work for a socially responsible organization and workplace commitment is a strong motivator for journalists second only to salary.

An additional concern of journalism and new media unions is the nature of new businesses in the marketplace. A number of new media companies have successfully come on to the scene and are in competition with traditional media companies such as the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. These new media companies, such as the now closed digital media outlet *Gawker* (Robertson 2023, Spangler 2023) are often characterized as ‘start-up’ cultures in which organizational structure is lacking and leadership tends to focus on staking a place in the market rather than on establishing a professional work environment. Leaders in these organizations are often criticized by their own employees as well as other media professionals for their ‘cult of personality’ media presence or the significant pay inequity between executives and journalists producing content. For example, *Thrillist* CEO Ben Lerer (son of venture capitalist Kenneth Lerer) and *Vice* CEO Shane Smith were both profiled in a negative light for their lavish spending while employees struggled with everyday living (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). In summary, many new

media companies demonstrate a relatively shocking disregard for traditional organizational structures where employees have no redress for harassment, pay inequity, low pay, and low morale. In the lack of organizational structure and worker input to management, it is not surprising that unionization would hold appeal in these contexts.

### **Identifying Managerial Challenges**

In reviewing journalism and new media unions as informal organizations, it is clear many managerial challenges are of concern. These concerns are found in each of the four basic managerial functions: planning, organizing, leading, and controlling (Griffin et al. 2017). From the management side, it is reasonable to consider the counterargument to unionization when planning for hiring and retention of employees. A primary concern of media organization is flexibility, particularly in the unsteady marketplace of media. Ideally, management would prefer the ability to make changes to employee costs in responses to revenue fluctuation, hence the significant number of freelancers employed by media organizations. In addition, management has reported that even if they wanted to build and lead a more diverse organization, it is simply difficult to hire diversity in journalists. Therefore, often the demands in CBAs for workplace diversity become a sticking point in negotiation (Cohen & de Peuter 2020). Most reasonable unionization efforts have conceded that diversity hiring is difficult and is a long-term problem, but many have stuck with their positions making the hiring of new employees take an inordinate amount of time.

Management should also be concerned about the approaches to handle complaints from employees on pay inequity and harassment. Ideally, organizational structure would be put into place such that employees are able to report harassment or pay inequities that violate state worker protections. While concerns arise that unions protect poor performing employees or those who engage in harassment, often unions have their own procedures for handling workplace issues. Union approaches to handling claims may even be more structured and efficient than in a non-union setting. A potential benefit for management in the context of unionizations is that there is a set procedure for handling claims laid out in the CBA and an effective human resources officer should be able to navigate an investigation and corrective action as needed.

### **Synthesis Across Lenses**

Unionization of journalism and new media businesses has an impact on all three lenses of organizational behavior. At the micro-scale, the nature of the journalism profession is self-selecting for employees intrinsically motivated and willing to work at a lower salary to meet their professional identity needs. However, journalists desire to have a reasonable salary floor and organizational structure with pay equity that a CBA can provide. At the meso-scale, unionization tends to bring together workers in common cause and thereby strengthen worker power in the organization. The group formation process where union skeptics and supporters come to a common understanding of the value of the union to their organization can lead to increase in morale and workplace commitment. The process may also aid in the identification of formal and informal workplace leaders who could provide benefit to the organization in the long run. At the macro-scale, unionization highlights the value of professional organizational structure and a

human resources approach to working with employees. Journalists are eager to have a 'voice' in their organization and leadership that embraces inclusion of worker input is likely to have greater worker satisfaction and commitment. Organizations that also put into practice union requests for protections in terms of harassment, pay inequity, and greater diversity in hiring are likely to have greater worker productivity.

### **Managerial Recommendations**

After reviewing the management concerns related to unionization and frequent requests found in CBAs of journalists and new media workers, the following recommendations should be considered by management of these organizations arranged in order from short term to longer term goals:

1. Establish formal human resources structures to set policy and to listen to employee concerns.
2. Consider pay bands for compensation to deal with workplace inequities.
3. Increase emphasis on fairness in compensation and working assignments.
4. Increase emphasis on protections from harassment.
5. Consider pay equity by gender, race, and ethnicity.
6. Establish merit standards and pay for performance metrics other than 'clicks.'
7. Consider compensation considerations for geographic inequities (e.g., as does New York State government employees).
8. Greater efforts to work with employees on 'side hustle' and freelance efforts as part of the necessity for meeting financial responsibilities.
9. Increase emphasis on importance of diversity in the workplace, including signaling support, acknowledging contributions of diverse employees, and engaging in long range efforts to support the development of a diverse workforce (e.g., internships and community support activities).
10. Provide startup media organizations with greater emphasis on organizational culture, professionalism, and image of executive leadership. Startup organizations should work with venture capital firms and mentors to follow examples of effective workplace cultures.
11. Increase tangible support of journalism as a profession through acknowledgement and meaningful efforts to support the profession as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, unionization of journalism and new media organizations has proven to yield tangible gains for employees, particularly in compensation minimums. By examining the current trend of unionization in this profession at the micro, meso, and macro level, it is evident that unions have additional benefits for these workers who are primarily intrinsically motivated. Management that considers the characteristics of journalists and new media professionals when developing organizational structure and benefits are likely to have a more effective workplace as

evidenced by workplace satisfaction and organizational commitment. In some cases, a more empowered workforce at small, startup organizations may be innovative and competitive in the marketplace. In the short run, unionization of the media landscape appears to be here to stay and is often referred to as a process which will keep journalism intact as a profession (Chang 2019). The success of unions in the media landscape has led to calls for other knowledge workers to follow suit, including workers in the video game industry and in graduate students in academia (Harrison 2022). With increasing interest in union organization in the 'new blue-collar workers' of today found in Amazon warehouses and Starbucks cafes, business leaders should consider the potential the potential benefits or challenges in managing a more organized workforce.

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