



Integrating Class into the Journalism and Mass Communication Curriculum

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Emphasizing class, race and gender in no way detracts from the traditional communications curriculum; rather, it offers a vantage point from which students can connect otherwise abstract policies and practices to the reality of their daily lives, and offers analytical tools that will better prepare them for the realities of careers in our industry (if that is indeed where they end up) than the Horatio Alger-like narratives of individuals succeeding by dint of hard work that too often pass for discussion of work in the media.

But while there has been increased attention to ethnic and gender diversity in the media in recent years, both in representation and employment, these discussions tend to overlook economic class – taking the neglect of workers’ lives and perspectives for granted (Bekken, 2005). In ignoring ordinary people in its coverage, Barnhurst (2009, 287) suggests, journalism has lost its way. “Citizens are absent except to illustrate journalists’ ideas. Readers care little about this sort of news. They have been abandoning it for decades.” The result is a deepening crisis that threatens the sustainability of traditional media organizations, and hence the ability of our students to secure employment in their chosen field. We need to confront this reality in our courses, and to better prepare our students for the changing media environment.

Textbooks play a central role in presenting professional norms and practices and in portraying industry conditions but have been criticized for their failure to reflect an increasingly diverse society (Brennen, 2000; Hardin, Dodd and Lauffer, 2006). Two decades ago, a close reading of 32 then-contemporary news writing

and reporting textbooks found that only two offered substantive discussion of covering workers, with most leaning heavily on single-sourced reporting in their examples and writing exercises (Bekken, 2000). Thus textbooks reinforce a lived experience in which students are unaccustomed to seeing the working class represented in the media at all, let alone treated as central actors to be afforded equal status with employers and government functionaries as sources and subjects (Bekken, 2005).

I teach both traditional journalism skills courses and courses in media history, research methods, and a course that tackles communications law through the prism of freedom of expression. Believing that it is the fundamental divide in our contemporary world, I seek to incorporate class into nearly every course. My students and colleagues approach these courses with somewhat different understandings, and so it is necessary to weave the issues into the very fabric of the courses such that they are clearly connected to curricular objectives and to students’ envisioned working lives.

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Media Law

The media law course is particularly rich in possibilities for raising issues of class, race and gender, and such an approach can help students grapple with material too many find intimidating and alien. Media law textbooks do not address workplace issues, aside from work-to-hire and other copyright issues facing freelance journalists (which are not typically framed as a labor issue, even if the leading case (Tasini) was brought by an official of the National Writers Union (Pember and Calvert, 2014; Hopkins, 2017; Carter, et al., 2011; Trager, et al., 2018). For a notable exception see the long-out-of-print discussion of the media and labor laws in Gillmor, Barron and Simon (1998, 554-65).

It is no doubt possible to teach a class that tackles the law and freedom of expression without confronting class and other power relationships in our society. But it is an unnatural act, one that divorces law from the social relations in which it is contested and ignores the underlying facts of many of the leading cases. The development of a meaningful right to freedom of speech and assembly is fundamentally a story of struggles first by small farmers and artisans and later by labor and civil rights movements to realize the liberties promised in the First Amendment (Cronin, 2016).

I begin the media law class by talking about law as a site of social contestation (drawing from the critical legal studies tradition), and then address battles to translate the words of the First Amendment into actual rights enjoyed by workers, African-Americans, women and others outside the centers of power (Rabban, 1999; Cronin, 2016). I do this by exploring the social context of the leading cases dealt with in the traditional canon (Schenck, Abrams, Gitlow, *Hague v. CIO*, Sullivan, Bond, etc.), but also through discussion of the contraception cases of the 1890s and beyond, the Industrial Workers of the World free speech fights, *Gompers v. Bucks Stove and Range*, and the many contemporary cases in which labor organizations have asserted free speech rights to advertise, leaflet and picket against private interests and quasi-public interests (Foner, 1981; Pollenberg, 1987).

I also discuss court cases (there are Supreme Court cases that speak to this, but the stench of power is more pungent in the lower courts) that make it clear that workers have no free speech rights that employers are obliged to respect. Students are quite shocked to learn that they can be fired for support-

ing a politician that their boss opposes, because their spouse has a bumper sticker on her car supporting a labor struggle, for publicizing an employer's labor practices, etc. (Barry, 2007).

In libel, the leading case (*Times v. Sullivan*, 1964) is fundamentally about the struggle against racial oppression, but the leading textbooks do not mention the four African-American Alabama ministers who were the New York Times' co-defendants, and who suffered grievous injury while the case traveled through the courts. Lewis (1991), in the most comprehensive treatment of the case, discusses the ministers' plight briefly (109-10, 123, 162-63), offering a valuable window into the social forces at play. As in Sullivan, the law of libel has its origins in the efforts of the powerful to protect themselves from criticism; a motive that continues to inform many libel cases to this day. A fairly recent example for which many online resources are readily available is the McLibel case from England: <http://www.mcspotlight.org/case/> The case also raises privacy issues, as it later came out that police had infiltrated the organization that distributed leaflets outside McDonald's outlets, helped to draft the leaflet that formed the basis for the libel action, monitored defense efforts, and even fathered children with activists (Lewis and Evans, 2013).

Gender figures more prominently in the traditional approach to privacy rights, but class is also deeply implicated in modern social media and surveillance technologies (Hodges and Hebert, 2008; Lewis, 2007). Leading cases in the area of commercial speech raise issues of women's rights to information about birth control; such laws have also been used against unions. Union attempts to claim a First Amendment right to reach out to workers or consumers through advertising have been almost uniformly rebuffed by the courts (except where government agencies directly control the advertising medium), allowing the owners of media corporations almost unfettered power over access to the public arena. Class power is deeply and unmistakably implicated in decisions such as *Chicago Joint Board, Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America v. Chicago Tribune*, 435 F.2d 470. (The case involved the *Tribune's* refusal to accept union advertising urging consumers to avoid sweatshop-manufactured clothing; unions have typically won lawsuits seeking to purchase advertisements against transit agencies, which are clearly government actors.)

Copyright involves the appropriation and inten-

sified valorization of the product of media workers' labor, and provides an opportunity to explore the increasingly precarious nature of media jobs. A broader discussion of intellectual property also opens a wide array of issues, from the private appropriation of natural organisms through the patent process to the systematic transfer of rights from the actual creators of copyrighted works to the owners of those rights (Yu, 2006). Fair use claims arise not only in students' social media use, and in the recent prominence of mash-ups and pastiche, but also in social movement organizations' parodies of corporate logos and slogans.

The history of broadcast regulation, as McChesney (1993) and others have pointed out, involved a protracted struggle between labor organizations and other media reformers and the ultimately successful advocates of a capitalist-controlled system, and so can easily serve as another prism for exploring questions of ownership and their implications for who enjoys actual (rather than merely theoretical) free speech rights. Access to government proceedings and public information is less directly tied to class, though these rights are frequently invoked by unions and other social movement organizations and their origins emerge directly out of democratic theory.

A particularly fruitful arena for raising class in the media law course finds no support in any of the currently available textbooks: media workers are of course workers, with much the same limited rights to organize and act collectively, to bargain over their working conditions, to be free of unsafe working conditions or harassment on the job, to receive minimum wage, etc., as other workers, although Bush- and Trump-era Labor Department regulations severely curtail the right of many journalists to claim overtime when forced to work more than 40 hours in a week. (Lynd and Gross, 2008) The dramatic growth of outsourcing, subcontracting and freelance labor in media industries in recent years, however, significantly limits the extent to which media workers are covered by these protections (Ornebring and Conill, 2016; Mosco and McKercher, 2010).

Media Histories

If the media law class offers a myriad of ways in which a class analysis is not only highly pertinent, but actually essential to understanding the workings of the legal system, the less-frequently offered course in media history also offers a natural venue in which to raise the process of production, and the changing ways in

which media have covered and interacted with the working class (Hardt and Brennen, 1995). Media history curricula have already changed substantially from their earlier Whiggish focus on the great men whose heroic efforts led us to the glories of today's *New York Times*, but too much of this progress has been by way of accreting onto already clunky narratives a broader array of media forms and alternative practices. The dominant narrative remains focused on mass media that were always only one part (albeit a major part) of a larger, more diverse media sphere. In Chicago, for example, in the early 20th century the majority of dailies were specialized newspapers – foreign-language papers, many linked to fraternal associations and other community organizations; political organs; trade newspapers (to say nothing of the myriad of weeklies) – that may have much to tell us about the emerging media eco-system (Bekken, 1997).

Media history textbooks largely ignore the history of class struggle within media industries, offering only passing references to the working conditions and struggles of the production workers, journalists and other employees of increasingly corporate media organizations. Folkerts, Teeter and Caudill (2009) give as much attention to labor as any textbook in this field. Its pages include a few paragraphs referencing early typographers' unions (104, 204), a sidebar noting that in the 1890s "a boy" could be found to set the type for a small town weekly newspaper for \$1 to \$5 a week (277), a discussion of reformers' concern with newsboy labor that ends with a brief reference to early attempts to organize by journalists (299-300), passing reference (348) to publishers' efforts to hold down the cost of labor, a few paragraphs on the formation of the American Newspaper Guild (371-72), a brief reference to wage cuts in the Great Depression (378), a few paragraphs on the American Newspapers Publishers Association's efforts to secure the open shop, unlimited overtime and continued access to child labor (380-81), a sentence on the 1967-68 Detroit newspaper strike (463) introducing a short discussion of changes in typesetting technology, and a few sentences on lay-offs at CBS (491-92). They also cite in their footnotes (282) a study on the economic status of journalists in turn-of-the-century Chicago. This discussion is scattered and episodic, with no effort to systematically track changing production relations or the role labor relations have played in shaping media ecologies.

In media history, faculty often teach units on

African-American, women's newspapers, and other "alternative" media. Many try to shift the focus from the "great" editors and publishers to social relationships, positioning media as a network of relationships between publics and publications, workers and owners, changing social conventions of what constitutes news, and the like. I rely on the textbook to offer an overview, using class time to probe more deeply into specific moments and alternative practices. A unit on Chicago journalism from the 1880s through the 1930s examines these questions in terms of the city's vibrant labor and foreign-language newspapers, the Chicago Newspaper Trust (which brought together the English-language general circulation dailies to pursue their common interests against labor, advertisers, and others), and the historical transition from publications oriented toward particular class, political and social niches to profit-centered publications that purported to speak to a broad, undifferentiated mass public (Bekken 1992, 1997, 2015).

Newswriting and Reporting

The communications research class poses no particular challenges, as there are countless articles and projects available that address class, gender and race, and illustrate how these issues can be effectively deployed in a mass communication context. So I conclude by discussing how these issues can be incorporated into journalism skills courses.

I seek to integrate class into the entire trajectory of our journalism skills courses, from the textbooks I select (it requires careful selection to find the handful of texts in which workers are not invisible, and are legitimated as both sources and subjects of news—supplemental materials and exercises often must suffice) to guest speakers. One assignment that is a constant in my newswriting course involves bringing in a speaker and requiring students to take notes and produce an article about what he or she said. Among those speakers were a Florida tomato picker involved in a campaign to improve wages and working conditions (this required translation from Spanish), a laid-off typesetter who spoke about the wage system as a regime of coerced labor, an anti-globalization activist, an adjunct faculty organizer, a climate change organizer who focuses on outreach to the labor movement, etc. The resulting articles can be painful illustrations of just how removed from most students' consciousness these topics are, but in addition to exposing students to perspectives they might otherwise never encounter

they offer a controlled setting in which the limitations of students' note-taking and information-processing skills can be readily identified, and which lay a foundation for subsequent discussions about the need to make sure they have all the information necessary to produce a coherent journalistic account (a task many initially assume will be quite simple). It is relatively straight-forward to build on such lessons through later writing assignments (which can and should be selected to force students to engage with conflicting and diverse perspectives) and style quizzes. Lanson and Stephens' (2008) newly-out-of-print newswriting textbook supports such an approach, giving business and labor perspectives equal attention. (Unfortunately, many newswriting textbooks offer exercises asking students to produce articles based on a press release, sometimes supplemented by interview notes from the same source, or similarly limited sourcing.)

In reporting, assignments invite students to incorporate workers' perspectives, require at least one labor or workplace story, and ask students to read a variety of news articles including several focused on poverty, working conditions and other subjects that are, at root, about class. While the available textbooks largely focus on employers and others in positions of power, (Houston et 2009) include workers and tenants in their chapters on covering business and real estate, while the final chapter offers strategies for investigating the world of the disadvantaged.

Copy editing textbooks similarly ignore working conditions, writing of editors as if they were autonomous professionals rather than increasingly overworked components of an industrial machine, faced with aggressive downsizing, outsourcing, casualization and the other forms of precarity facing workers the whole world over (Ornebring and Conill, 2016). Lieb (2016, 2) is an exception, confronting the issue head-on:

A study conducted by the American Society of News Editors found that the number of copy editors in newsrooms decreased by almost 50 percent from 2002 to 2012... [E]ven when positions were not eliminated, highly paid experienced editors sometimes were let go in favor of younger editors. Those newcomers would work for less money, but ... were more likely to let mistakes slip through.

Given this reality, it is important to stress the wide array of contexts in which editing skills can be brought to bear. I require students to identify an un-

deserved target audience and craft an editorial vision for a magazine, newsletter or website to serve it. Story selection, copy editing, headline writing and design and production are all addressed within this framework. I also seek diverse material for editing exercises and challenge students to think about who the local paper is speaking to with its Business and Lifestyle sections. This course also requires sustained attention to the changing economic conditions in publishing, with significant implications for the nature of editing work and the conditions under which it will be performed. As students learn to focus upon the needs of their audiences while preparing material for publication, issues of class and other under-represented groups must be addressed.

Developing Self-Reflective Communicators

In short, with a handful of exceptions, if issues of class—whether on a broader societal level, or in terms of the conditions our students can expect to encounter once they enter the media industry job market—are to be addressed in a substantive way in our pedagogy, it is up to us to introduce them into our courses. Students will not encounter them in their textbooks, nor will our colleges' career centers prepare them for the realities of working life in contemporary communications industries.

There can be resistance to this approach, not so much from administrators (they tend to be far more concerned when my students probe into controversies on campus) as from colleagues who see this as a bit eccentric. More importantly, students do not necessarily embrace a class-based approach. Many do not see themselves as part of the working class (even if they find themselves obliged to work long hours to pay for college), and many of those who do hope that their college education will enable them to escape this status. My students typically have a vocation-centered consciousness, and I have been asked more than once when discussing the application of the Fair Labor Standards Act to journalistic labor whether this will be on the final exam.

But while it was clear from their articles that most students were mystified by my speaker on wage slavery, two years later one of those students wrote a column for the student newspaper talking about how his recent firing from his part-time job (he had requested time off for a fraternity function, was denied at the last minute, and attended anyway) had brought that concept home. Another student developed a series of

articles on adjunct faculty labor that were published in the student newspaper and won a national award for social justice journalism from the Newspaper Guild. Many students have published articles written for my classes in campus and community media; they stand out, in part, precisely because they do not follow the well-trodden paths of official functions and routine events.

Few of our students will pursue careers in daily newspapers or broadcast news operations; instead they find work with newsletters and weeklies, or handle organizations' communications activities across a range of platforms. A broader approach to what constitutes news, to whose voices are worthy of consideration, will serve them well in identifying such opportunities, and in effectively serving communities that are too often neglected, both in our pedagogy and by media that must find new audiences if they are to flourish.

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