
**Reviewed by** Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

**Published on** Jhistory (September, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Robert A. Rabe

The Working Class As Newsworthy

Christopher R. Martin’s meticulously researched *No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class* pulls together several strands of historical development, all of which are centered on the economic pressures that prompted the self-destruction of the newspaper industry. The industry’s step-by-step conversion into a shameless appendage of the corporate system provides the background for the subsequent rediscovery of the working class by the mainstream media in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential victory. Even before the Republican Party focused on the traditional, factory-oriented working class as a constituent group, the print media had abandoned it as a newsworthy topic, choosing instead to upscale newspaper audiences in order to attract advertising.

Martin notes that “the white, male worker [has been] deployed as the symbolic representation of the US working class with almost regular repetition in modern politics and news media reports of the past fifty years,” appearing as Richard Nixon’s “hard hats” in the early 1970s, “Reagan Democrats” in the following decade, and “Joe the Plumber” in John McCain’s presidential run in 2008 (p. 2). Trump continued a long-standing tradition within the conservative camp, invoking a besieged working class that it had little intention of helping economically but against whom it pitted other groups within the population perceived to be a threat, such as underrepresented minorities and immigrants. This strategy of setting in contention the weak against the weaker is a repulsive hallmark of American politics, but it is also one that the print media inadvertently helped to make possible.

At first, the reorientation of the print media toward the middle and upper middle classes had little to do with the corporate reorganization of the communications industry that took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s, decades of economic crisis and tumult that transformed the domestic and international economies. The reorientation of the media, nonetheless, left it open to criticism from a fundamentalist, hardcore Right that branded it a tool of the economic elite. Talk radio, in the aftermath of deregulation in the late 1980s and loosening of fairness doctrines that required a balanced representation of views, became a base of operations for these attacks. The internet, despite the initial gloating about its democratizing potential, also became a bastion of hard Right politics. By this time, the media in general—print, TV and radio, cable and satellite, and online—were so
thoroughly dependent on advertising revenue rather than on subscribers, that the non-elite, for example, the working class, disappeared from coverage, except every four years when the Right re-invoked its existence as a source of electoral support.

Television was the first of the new consumer technologies to prompt the transformation of print media. Television quickly replaced the newspaper as the public’s main source of news, and this intensified the competition for advertisers and reinforced the print media’s reorientation toward wealthier subscribers. It also drove forward the need for corporate investment and protection. Whereas the media had been accountable previously to advertisers and its readers/listeners/viewers, investors became a new variable because of their interest in media companies’ stock prices. Working-class readers were no longer a primary target, largely abandoned to the easily digestible format of television.

Except for a handful of noteworthy exceptions, the print media transitioned fairly rapidly into a conveyor of advertisements rather than a medium of news. Newspaper content was also up-scaled to issues and reading levels that accorded with wealthier segments of the population. While television packaged the news into sound bites and short summaries, newspapers refocused on lengthier pieces aimed at an informed and highly educated public, that is, college graduates. No Longer Newsworthy includes reproductions of the advertisements that accompanied the promotional campaigns for upscale subscribers, a process that began as early as the 1940s. This was nearly a half century before the entire consumer market was refocused on the upper 20 percent of the population.

The content of newspaper reporting shifted alongside these other changes. Rather than concentrating on labor strife and union-management contract negotiations, for instance, consumerism became the new focus. Lifestyles of the rich and comfortable replaced articles about the working class. Business sections were added to many newspapers, and newspaper staffs were altered accordingly. The abandonment of the working class opened the door for right-wing news services. The Far Right had wealthy benefactors and a widespread network of conservative religious leaders who helped shape the views of their congregants. Mediums considered off-beat at first, such as direct mail, cable news, talk radio, and eventually the internet, became the purveyors of a new politicized cynicism directed against preexisting norms.

Some of the best material in No Longer Newsworthy is reserved for the final chapters. In a smartly chosen case study on right-wing opposition to progressive workplace legislation, Martin explains: “in the vast majority of news stories the Republican and business sources that use the ‘job killer’ accusation do so with impunity because journalists fail to verify the allegations or give readers a balanced view of the issue” (pp. 178-79). Unfounded assertions abound in the news, all because the media no longer have sufficient investigative staffs, lack editorial independence from the companies and individuals who own them, and are keenly aware that controversy discourages advertisers.

In contrast to the fake news from the Right regarding “job killer” accusations, Martin conducts a thought experiment. He calculates excess pay as anything more than 29.9 times the compensation of the average worker. He includes in this figure executive compensation for CEOs, equity fund directors, and hedge fund managers, as well as money stashed in off-shore accounts. Nearly twenty-four million new jobs could be created instead, all full-time and all with pay pegged at the “living wage” of $15 per hour or $31,200 for full-time, year-round employment. This is the hidden cost of an elite that is able to redirect economic rewards toward itself. Of course, reallocating these funds is a short-term solution. Much of it would be used up the first year. Still, spread over a ten-year
period, more than two million additional “livable” jobs would be available. The current system of inequality and maldistribution has substantial play within it, even if there are limits to how far the system can be pushed.

The golden age for Martin was the Keynesian era of the few exceptionally prosperous decades that followed World War II. According to Martin, “US workers fought for decades for respect and representation in the workplace,” wherein “the high wages of the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s existed because during this period from a quarter to more than a third of US workers were covered by contracts collectively negotiated by their labor unions” (p. 9). Martin’s quixotic hope for a revival of unions, especially among journalists, does not interfere with the quality of his research or the integrity of his argumentation, even though it does structure the overall contours of No Longer Newsworthy. He admits that the unions he so values were never particularly good representatives of the workforce, making his praise of them all-the-more peculiar. As a rule, unions have only been successful when government has backed their efforts or at least played a strictly neutral role in labor-business conflicts. That has not been the case for a very long time, and consequently, unions barely exist anymore in the private sector and only thrive among public employees. Even though Martin has written a history of newspaper journalism from a union perspective, his honesty as a commentator, great skills as a researcher, and deep, careful argumentation make this book worthy of considerable attention.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54362

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.