Labour has continued to remain in the blind-spot of journalism and communication studies, particularly in Canada. With the exception of analyses of the International Typographic Union, research that studies labour processes in tandem with organized labour in the communications and cultural industries is rare indeed. Towards filling this immense void, McKercher draws on her experiences as a communications’ worker in both journalism and academia to provide a comprehensive account of how the principle union for journalists and other unions representing a range of media workers in the telecommunications, information, media, and entertainment (or TIME) industry, merged with either the international Communication Workers of America (CWA), or the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). Specifically she explains why the main union of journalists—The Newspaper Guild—divided itself and merged with these two unions that she argues was largely a consequence of corporate and technological convergence.

Contributing to political economy, communication, and labour studies, McKercher begins her study in the 1960s to bring forward three significant changes affecting communication workers today. Given that newspapers of the distant past tended to be separately owned businesses, with an obligation to their readers and a stake in the community in which they operated, they have increasingly become vertically and horizontally integrated into multi-media, and national or multi-national conglomerates that are more accountable to their shareholders than their workers, readers, or community. Developments in computer technology have facilitated and intensified this corporate convergence, and as McKercher demonstrates through chronological and detailed descriptions of changes in newspaper production, newsworker’s jobs (from editors and reporters to the print and mail workers) have been fundamentally altered, and either consolidated, contracted out, or eliminated. Similar to other industries, this combination of corporate and technological convergence has resulted in a net loss of workers’ control over their jobs, their tools and their employment security, instigating a corresponding change in organized labour. As McKercher suggests, union members in the communications’ industries are in the process of rethinking and reorganizing themselves, transforming their organizational structures, ideas, and practices traditionally based on clear divisions of labour, discrete union jurisdictions, and separate employers, to those that encompass the complete range of workers across the TIME industries, adding to what she calls “labour convergence.”

Delving into union conference proceedings, submissions to labour boards, personal interviews with union leaders, and years of union newsletters, McKercher concentrates the bulk of her book on painstakingly taking us through the complex, convoluted, fractious, and yes, at times frustrating, decision-making and internal politics of unions aiming to operate democratically. Such attention to detail reveals that although unions have long recognized corporate and technological convergence as compelling reasons for building durable unity, forging cohesive relationships out of a traditionally divisive organizational structure is an extended and arduous task. Concentrating on the Newspaper Guild specifically, the study demonstrates the decision-making within and among unions that resulted in some of the Guild locals joining the national CEP while others chose to belong to the international CWA. As McKercher identifies, those who joined with the CWA in 1995, forming The Newspaper Guild (TNG Canada), decided that the security of a larger membership and access to greater resources were overriding benefits of belonging to an international union. Representing journalists working in print, commercial, and public broadcasting as well as former Typographical Union members, TNG Canada is, in the author’s words, a “living example of labour convergence in the communication sector” (p. 139).
Illustrating a form of labour convergence on the local level, McKercher also tracks how seven different bargaining units at the Pacific Press (Vancouver Sun and Vancouver Province) consolidated into one union as induced by their employer and fortified by a ruling of the B.C. Labour Relations Board. The resulting Media Union of British Columbia (est. 1998) includes former Guild members and their historical experiences with the CWA such as a lack of local autonomy, the constant danger of being subject to neo-conservative U.S. labour laws, as well as divergent political goals, which heavily influenced the decision to merge with the CEP. As McKercher observes, the choice indicates the prevalence of nationalism within the Canadian labour movement and provides a possible “template for how mergers at national and international levels can filter down to the level of the workplace” (p. 180).

Although this dissertation-turned-book is a self-identified “work in progress,” it could have better contributed to our understanding of labour in the communication and cultural (or TIME) industries by giving us a clearer sense of the overall breaks and mergers within this sector of the labour movement. Otherwise, we have to follow the variety of occupations, local bargaining units, and unions that form and reform the structures of the organized communication worker as we are introduced to them in the text. A few chronological tables or organizational charts identifying major union decisions, occupational groupings, and organizational (re)formations would not go amiss in offering the reader an in-text reference and providing future scholars a template on which to build.

In addition, while we are given statistics of union membership, we are not given an estimate of the extent of communications’ workers who are as yet unorganized. Given that overall union membership in Canada hovers around thirty percent we may hazard a guess, but how do the TIME industries compare to other sectors in Canada (and the U.S.)? This is relevant since the author identifies one of the “prospects” of organizing newsworkers as being related to the traditional news “culture,” one in which journalists see themselves as professionals and more likely to organize with other so-called intellectual workers rather than technician and trades or manual workers. While this may represent a future prospect of labour convergence, McKercher’s own detailed analysis indicates that this kind of thinking and organizational structure results in replication and further entrenchment of traditional divisions of labour rather than indicating fundamental change.

These observations notwithstanding, the author’s careful study of these selected examples of labour convergence clearly sorts out what would otherwise seem an impossible morass of organizational democracy-in-action and makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the problems, challenges, prospects, and limitations of the convergence of labour. The book’s overall readability means that it is accessible to undergraduate students and is as helpful for scholars as it is for communication workers and union organizers in furthering links between theory and practice.

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