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Communicating a Local Journalism Crisis Online: How Media Workers Frame Industry Changes

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how newswriters' trade unions framed industry and newswork changes on their websites and Twitter in the United States between 2015 and 2022 as unionization increased. Grounded in critical political economy of journalism and social movement studies of industrial relations, this study conducts a frame analysis of unionization announcements ($N=141$) from the Writers Guild of America, East, and The NewsGuild. This analysis is supported by interviews ($N=32$) with unionized newswriters and a union organizer. Unionization announcements are aimed at employers, newswriters, and the general public. This article builds an integrated conceptual framework on how unions use online communicative framing to strategically express a local journalism crisis narrative online in these announcements and the internal organizational process shaping their narrative. The analysis reveals a hybrid union-oriented narrative, reflecting unions' unique circumstances and heterogeneous perceptions of industry and workforce changes. This narrative blends elements from the competing business-oriented, financialization, and labor-oriented narratives, emphasizing labor concerns. These findings offer insights into unions' conciliatory communication strategies that have the potential to shape their power struggles with management. They highlight the need to consider the influence of online organizing and social media on framing narratives since the digital era.

KEYWORDS

Digital journalism; industrial relations; frame analysis; labor; political economy; social media; trade unions; work

Introduction

More than 7500 US workers unionized at internet-only and legacy multiplatform publishing and broadcasting companies between April 2015 and June 2021, joining the Writers Guild of America, East (WGAE), The NewsGuild (TNG), or Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) (Cohen and de Peuter 2020; Fu 2021a; Salamon 2023a, 2023b, 2024). Although union representation rates are low, they increased in publishing from 3.8% in 2014 to 6% in 2022, and in broadcasting, from 7.6% in 2014 to 11.5% in 2022 (US Bureau of Labor

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Statistics [BLS] 2023a, 2023b). When going public, WGAE and TNG union organizing committees typically published announcements on autonomous websites or Twitter (now X), targeting employers, other workers, and the general public. These announcements provide insights into how unionized newswriters communicated industry and newswork changes, including financing, ownership, and working conditions, and newswriters' perceived ability to fulfill journalism's democratic mission (Salamon 2023b). Existing literature highlights media company and managerial perspectives on industry and newswork changes in multiplatform digital journalism production or the impacts of digital technologies on business models and practices (Abernathy 2022; Almiron-Roig 2011; McChesney and Nichols 2022; Pickard 2020). More research is needed on how newswriters and trade unions use online communication to frame such changes. This focus could provide insights into the ongoing power struggles between workers and management within digital journalism.

Accordingly, this article conducts a frame analysis of 141 public "Why We've Organized" unionization announcements to understand how newswriters' unions framed industry and newswork changes in the United States between 2015 and 2022. These announcements serve as key texts that unions use as a communicative practice of collective action. Despite their brevity, these announcements are typically unions' primary public-facing communications through social media, making them essential for understanding unions' interests and collective action within their broader communication strategy (Geelan 2022; Salamon 2023b; Valentini et al. 2020). Compared to union press releases or newsletters, which are not always shared widely or created at all, unionization announcements can potentially reach a wider audience and directly inform public debate. Furthermore, while news outlets occasionally interview union representatives, they reduce the content to soundbites.

This article is grounded in critical political economy of journalism and social movement studies of industrial relations (IR). Cohen (2016, 25) asserts that examining "labor-capital relations in cultural production contributes to a fuller account of the structural processes that shape ... journalists' work and charts paths toward addressing challenges and inequalities." This approach also recognizes journalism's role as a "public good," essential for democracy, "but that the market cannot produce in sufficient quality or quantity" (McChesney and Nichols 2022, 13). Additionally, social movement studies of IR provide insights into how unions take collective action and frame responses to industry challenges through their online communication (Gahan and Pekarek 2013).

Unions like TNG and WGAE hold potential to be powerful organizations for newswriters' resistance and legal defense. Since their founding in 1933 and 1951, respectively, these guilds, referred to as "craft unions," have advocated for decent pay and professional standards, emphasizing the individualistic "artistry of the profession" (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2016, 270, 273). By comparison, class-based unions prioritize cross-craft solidarity, advocating for broader social, political, and economic changes (Mosco and McKercher 2008; Salamon 2023a). However, unions face challenges, including skepticism among some newswriters, who fear unionization might conflict with their professional roles or the individualistic nature of newswork. Despite these challenges, TNG and WGAE have adopted a public-facing approach to communicate industry and workforce changes.

This article argues that communicative framing can reveal how unions publicly and strategically communicate industry and newswork changes. While newswriters' unions might frame industry changes without relying on communicative framing, this article examines how public framing in unionization announcements serves as an organizing tactic, informing the public, navigating industry changes, and facilitating collective action. Their framing could also perpetuate or reshape dominant media industry narratives. Accordingly, this article asks three research questions: RQ1: How have US newswriters' unions framed institutional changes in the industry in their online unionization announcements between 2015 and 2022? RQ2: How have unions framed workforce changes in their unionization announcements? RQ3: How have unions' internal organizational process shaped their frames?

Next, this article reviews existing research on media industry and newswork changes, particularly local journalism crisis narratives within political economy and sociological approaches. Following, it considers frame analysis research on unions' collective action online, grounded in social movement and IR literature, aiming to build an integrative conceptual framework to analyze unions' online communicative framing. The article then applies this framework to a frame analysis of the WGAE's and TNG's unionization announcements, providing insights into how they communicated industry changes. The concluding section discusses the broader implications of online communicative framing, particularly how it extends and generates journalism crisis narratives, and offers insights into conducting a frame analysis on IR and social media content.

Literature Review

This section critically assesses literature characterizing news industry and work changes. It is focused on three narratives: a business-oriented local journalism crisis; a financialization narrative critiquing the business-oriented narrative; and a labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative. The *business-oriented local journalism crisis narrative* foregrounds economic sources. Proponents attribute a journalism crisis primarily to factors like the 2007–2008 recession, rise of the web, digital convergence, new online business models, decreasing advertising revenues, or shifting audience patterns (Abernathy 2022; McChesney and Nichols 2022; Pickard 2011, 2020).

Other critics question dire claims, fostering a *narrative critiquing the business-oriented crisis narrative*. Almiron-Roig (2011) reveals a longer historical trajectory, identifying *financialization* as the primary underlying cause of news industry changes since the 1990s. Winseck (2011, 45) also challenges those “catastrophic claims regarding the ‘death,’ [or] ‘crisis,’” arguing that they “are at odds with the evidence.” Edge (2014) supports this stance, concluding that the crisis is a “myth” based on financial analysis of the profitability of North American print media ownership groups. Rather than use crisis language, Wilkinson and Winseck (2019, 375) emphasize “wrenching changes that episodically remake particular media sectors.”

This narrative highlights how increasing financialization has episodically contributed to changing local journalism business models. Financialization links media companies to “financial capitalism and the commoditization of journalism” (Almiron-Roig 2011, 45). It foregrounds equity or investment firm media ownership, with media companies

acting according to stock market expectations, growing debt, engaging in speculative financial investments, and including banking or advertising representatives on their boards of directors. Almiron-Roig (2011, 44) affirms, “financialized corporate logics have been at the true core of the dismantling of the democratic potential of journalism.” Researchers suggest that addressing financialization and commercialization could protect local journalism as a viable institution and uphold its fundamental democratic role (Almiron-Roig 2011; McChesney and Nichols 2022; Pickard 2020). One of journalism’s basic tasks in a democracy is “observing and informing the public, primarily as a service to the public” and providing communities’ critical information needs (Christians et al. 2010, 116).

The roots of this narrative lie in a wave of media ownership consolidation in the 1990s and early 2000s (Almiron-Roig 2011; Edge 2014; Winseck 2011). This period was marked by high industry profitability when many newspapers were sold for more than their annual earnings. However, profit ratios sharply declined, which were being generated on smaller revenue bases, and exacerbated by the introduction of social media platforms and the 2007–2008 recession. Hedge funds (e.g., Chatham Asset Management and Alden Global Capital) and private equity firms (e.g., Apollo Global Management) acquired hundreds of newspapers and chains, like GateHouse and Tribune (Abernathy 2020, 2022). Some of them were in bankruptcy proceedings, financing their purchases with debt and implemented cost-cutting measures: employee layoffs, wage freezes, benefit reductions, and restructuring of sales and editorial functions into regional hubs. They used profits to pay off loans, shareholder dividends, and management fees, rather than reinvest into newspapers to provide adequate local news coverage.

News companies faced further financial challenges in the 2010s due to declining print revenues and competition from social media platforms, which could not be offset by online revenues (Pickard 2020). Media consolidation has continued to shape the industry, while profits and revenues of publicly traded newspaper companies have still declined, as companies have incurred more debt to finance purchases (Abernathy 2022). Profit margins have been lower than profitability typified in the industry 25 years ago and profit expectations have been higher due to financialization (Almiron 2013; Almiron-Roig 2011; Edge 2014). These factors have contributed to a 25% decrease in the number of newspapers in the United States between 2004 and 2020 (Abernathy 2020) and job cuts (Wilkinson and Winseck 2019; Williams 2017). The number of journalists employed by digital-native publishers has increased, but it has not compensated for the loss of newspaper journalists. The financialization of media executive compensation packages has also become a core characteristic of a managerial elite (Almiron 2013).

Both the business-oriented local journalism crisis narrative and the financialization narrative critiquing it accepts that the industry is faced with financial and economic threats. Yet, the former attributes these threats primarily to extra-industry factors, including advertisers’ changing preferences and the introduction of new technologies. The latter attributes these threats to intra-industry factors, like equity or investment ownership and increased debt. However, these crisis narratives are framed from employers’ perspectives and interests, downplaying newswriters’ perspectives and labor interests.

Researchers have also used a *labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative* to understand industry changes. Permanent full-time local news employees experience precarious work due to structural conditions, including low pay, time crunch, increased workload, stress, and burnout (Cohen 2016; Ekdale et al. 2015; Örnebring 2018; Salamon 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and intensified work overload, stress, and anxiety due to virtual workplace restructuring and job loss (García-Avilés 2021). Precariousness could constrain how newswriters and their employers respond to economic and technological changes, impacting their ability to execute journalism's democratic mission. Journalists may think that their jobs are at risk due to industry fragility and their labor process contributes to "normative failure": "journalists' belief in their ability to execute [normative] functions" (Siegelbaum and Thomas 2016, 400–401). Such industry instability and precarious newswriting could restrict newswriters' ability to satisfy journalism's democratic mission to inform citizens (Salamon 2020). Journalism therefore faces a "precarity penalty," limiting the type of content that newswriters can produce (Cohen 2016, 232). If there is a relationship between precarious work, content, and "democratic life ... the risk is that increased workloads, reduced workforces and more precarious employment conditions will direct[ly] affect the quality of journalism" (Bibby 2014, 30). These narratives suggest how newswriters might frame their unionization campaigns and diagnose industry and newswriting changes. More research is needed on how newswriters' unions communicate such changes.

Conceptual Framework

This section builds a conceptual framework to examine how newswriter unions' communicative framing practices shape organizing campaigns and power relations. It uniquely integrates social movement and IR approaches to frame analysis. Cohen and de Peuter (2020, 27) have explored why newswriters unionize and how they might frame industry and newswriting reorganization, noting how "communication is the stuff of mobilizing," as unions have used *collective action frames* (CAFs) to mobilize. However, further conceptual development is needed to analyze how media unions frame their communication and varying aims through social media discourse, which can enhance our understanding of industry changes and power relations.

CAF research has been informed by an IR approach to analyzing unions' communicative practices in the pre-digital era (Gahan and Pekarek 2013). Benford and Snow (2000, 615–617) outline "core framing tasks" of a social movement organization (SMO), such as a union, which include "diagnostic framing" (problem identification and attributions). SMOs facilitate diagnostic framing through different "frame alignment processes": they include "frame extension," which links a SMO's and other groups' values and interests, articulating their unique CAFs as compatible, and "frame transformation," which foregrounds new values and interests to adjust traditionally accepted CAFs (Benford and Snow 2000; Gahan and Pekarek 2013; Snow et al. 1986). Unions translate those core framing tasks into discursive power, enabling them to produce, "self-mediate," and circulate their frames through print, broadcast, and/or digital media outlets to reach a wider audience (Geelan 2022, 166).

Unions help facilitate collective action by adopting *master frames*. Master frames are broad and overarching. They connect larger political-economic critiques of capitalism and power with the more specific issues individual unions face, which unions express through context-specific CAFs (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Gahan and Pekarek 2013; Steinberg 1999a). Master frames are “generic” and more “flexible” (Snow and Benford 1992, 138, 140), making them adaptable to various stakeholders and across different contexts. By contrast, CAFs are more focused and specific to particular situations or issues individual unions address. For example, master frames may emphasize normative principles, like justice, democracy, protection, and workers’ rights (Gahan and Pekarek 2013; Valentini et al. 2020), which are relevant to various social movement struggles. Conversely, a CAF would apply those broader principles to a specific campaign, like a union’s organizing efforts to secure better wages or job security. Unions use these frames flexibly in ways that align with their shared “occupational identity” (Rothstein 2019, 574–575).

Unions embed these master frames within a wider discursive repertoire, which encompasses a range of narratives and rhetorical strategies. For example, the political-economy frame highlights the erosion of normative principles, like justice and democracy, framing these issues as instances of “injustice” and “power” imbalances (Carroll and Ratner 1996, 609). Workers collectively construct narratives of injustice, drawing from a “discursive repertoire ... largely defined by their employers” (Steinberg 1999b, 769–770). This “repertoire” includes “fighting words”—a range of linguistic tools actors use to mobilize support—allowing for “variation” in how discourses are used “to construct mobilizing and injustice frames” (Steinberg 1999a, 20). For instance, knowledge workers, like newswriters, often collectively incorporate managerial discourse into their own frames “to illustrate the potential effectiveness of collective action to save their jobs ... and persuade their coworkers to participate” (Rothstein 2019, 577). However, more research is needed on how unions strategically frame social media discourse, particularly to potentially influence public debates and enhance their discursive power.

Preliminary research suggests that unions frame website content and social media posts, which inform public debates, bolster their political influence, increase their collective bargaining strength, and affect change within their employer organizations (Geelan 2022; Valentini et al. 2020). Però and Downey (2024, 144) term this mobilizing “communicative unionism,” linking “industrial action with framing and staging disputes in the public arena ... to appeal to sympathetic bystanders in order to elicit concessions from employers.” Through such online framing, workers have formed *virtual unions*, leveraging the internet’s affordance of visibility. Unions create websites and social media accounts, circulating content to cultivate a unique organizational identity through digital organizing campaigns that is separate from other union actions (Salamon 2023b). Virtual unions adapt their CAFs to rapidly evolving institutional and societal circumstances to enhance their “power resources” (Barranco and Molina 2021, 1249). Finally, to understand the origin and nature of frames, researchers must also examine how unions construct frames as part of a “social process,” focusing on how internal organizational processes and power dynamics shape frame construction (Carragee and Roefs 2004) by frame sponsors, including unions (Valentini et al. 2020).

Materials and Methods

Integrating frame analysis and interviews, this article analyzes organizing committees' online unionization announcements ($N=141$). The data sources include announcements by organizing committees affiliated with TNG ($n=110$) or the WGAE ($n=31$). Most announcements reflect organizing committees' mission statements; six TNG-affiliated announcements are standalone announcements that organizing committees published on union websites or Twitter. They offer an online, public, and cross-workplace record of US unionization announcements in which each organizing committee outlined why it organized between April 2015 and December 2022, rather than a representative industry-wide sample of all newswriters or unions. As part of a larger research project on media workers' unionization (Salamon 2023b), this article specifically examines the use of diagnostic framing within unionization announcements. Unlike prognostic and motivational framing, which are oriented toward solutions (Benford and Snow 2000), this article concentrates on how these announcements identify and highlight industry-related issues without necessarily proposing ways to resolve them. It does not suggest that these announcements do not employ other core framing tasks. It is also beyond the scope of this article to determine if newswriters have won any meaningful material gains and a stronger collective voice at work due to these unionization efforts.

To identify the public online unionization announcements to analyze, this study built a timeline of TNG's and the WGAE's unionization campaigns from 2015 to 2022 (Salamon 2024). Existing timelines served as a starting point (Cohen and de Peuter 2020; Fu 2021a, 2021b; Salamon 2023b). To supplement this information, this study consulted unions' official websites including TNG's "News" section of <https://newsguild.org>, the WGAE mission statements and press releases in the "Online Media Shops" section of <https://www.wgaeast.org>, and the WGAE's organizing "Timeline" section of <https://www.digitalmediarising.org>. Additionally, web searches were conducted for announcements that unions published on their websites or Twitter accounts.

The primary data for this article are the transcripts of the 141 online unionization announcements, from Gawker Media Union in April 2015 to Reviewed Union in December 2022. They range from 32 to 987 words, comprising a corpus of 54,105 words or 223 double-spaced pages and averaging 384 words each. The announcements cover TNG- or WGAE-affiliated organizing committees at more than 180 media publications, representing more than 7500 workers at digital-only news and specialty publications, multimedia daily newspapers, specialty magazines, and broadcasting companies including for-profit and non-profit organizations. This article examines how these announcements collectively become part of a larger discursive repertoire that has the potential to spread and grow.

To supplement these announcements and obtain context for interpreting them, this article also relies on 32 semi-structured interviews with a sample of TNG and WGAE bargaining unit members and a union staff member conducted between October and December 2021. Interview recruitment ended after data saturation was reached. This research received institutional research ethics approval and interviewees gave their written informed consent. To encourage them to speak freely, participants were offered the option to remain anonymous and were assigned interviewee numbers.

Examining the semantic content, this article grounds the unionization announcements in a frame analysis, drawing on the communicative unionism framework outlined in the previous section. The announcements were read thrice. A preliminary analysis was performed before the interviews, so the results could be discussed in the interviews. Following, the discourse-based interview was adopted (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington 1983). This method involves discussing with interviewees the written text to which they contributed. Questions were asked to uncover how the unionization announcement writing process evolved, including who made decisions, what language was used, and how the announcements were informed by committee members' perceptions of media industry and workforce changes. These interviews substantiated the researcher's interpretations of the announcements, helped expand on patterns uncovered in the preliminary analysis, and offered suggestions for more patterns (Carragee and Roefs 2004).

ATLAS.ti and NVivo CAQDAS were used to archive the data, create the aforementioned timeline, and code the data. The researcher and a research assistant conducted first-order coding to limit possible biases in the analysis. The researcher could then perform keyword searches to narrow this article's analytic focus, conduct axial coding to uncover relationships across the data, and document "analytic decisions in a transparent, reflexive, rigorous and systematic way" (Paulus and Lester 2016, 424). This technique led to 74 first-order descriptive codes, which were folded into two diagnostic master frames and five CAFs. The next section analyzes how the unionization announcements combine a political-economy master frame, occupational-identity master frame, and elements of the three journalism crisis narratives in their CAFs to extend and transform crisis narratives.

Results

This section analyzes the three journalism crisis narratives within media unions' discursive repertoire, focusing on industry and workforce changes and the context-specific CAFs used to express those narratives. The first subsection examines how unionization announcements communicate industry changes through the competing business-oriented crisis and financialization critique narratives, utilizing a political-economy diagnostic master frame and media union CAFs (media financing, media ownership, and the COVID-19 pandemic). The second subsection considers how these announcements communicate workforce changes through the dominant labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative, employing an occupational-identity diagnostic master frame and media union CAFs (job loss and job security). Together, these findings illuminate a hybrid union-oriented local journalism crisis narrative, with the precarity narrative as the most significant in reflecting unions' primary concern: workforce changes. Individual announcements draw on elements from at least two of the three narratives to construct a complex, hybrid narrative. This hybrid narrative results from unions' discursive repertoire (Steinberg 1999a), remixing elements from different crisis narratives. The third subsection analyzes how the technological mediation of virtual unionism, the occupational-identity frame, and the principle of democracy shaped this union-oriented narrative's development within the organizing process.

From Business-Oriented Local Journalism Crisis to Financialization Critique Narratives

The business-oriented local journalism crisis narrative, shaped by the political-economy master frame, initially played a key role in the diagnostic framing employed in online unionization announcements in the early phase of unionization efforts. TNG-represented unions tended to emphasize this narrative, likely because its membership predominately consists of newswriters at daily newspapers and specialty magazines, where financial instability and ownership change have long been key concerns (Abernathy 2022). The announcements begin by acknowledging the structural forces that shape the digital media industry. First, unionization announcements characterize the industry as unstable due to factors such as media financing. As some announcements put it, the industry has been “under threat by volatile economic forces” (Chicago Tribune Guild 2018) and “the changing nature of the global economy” (Quartz Union 2019). These forces have contributed to internal industry struggles: “[d]windling advertising and subscription revenues” (Lawrence Journalism Workers Guild 2020) and “declining profits” (Desert Sun NewsGuild 2020). Some organizing committees also perpetuate the sense of a local media financial crisis. As Interviewee 1 puts it, “Everyone knows that newspaper revenues have declined over the past 25 years.” Likewise, Interviewee 2 explains that their company was “in a much more financially precarious position” even as a digital-first outlet. Newsrooms arguably face significant risks due to such financial concerns, which could further weaken newswriters’ already-limited power (Mosco and McKercher 2008).

Second, this framing of industry changes was magnified by a media-ownership turmoil CAF, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewee 3 explains, “Whenever there’s a sale within media, it makes people uncomfortable. Because you could have a new boss who doesn’t like the way you’ve been doing stuff and might say, ‘Fire everyone, pivot to video.’” Thus, unionization announcements bemoan a consolidating media industry of mergers and corporate chain ownership. For instance, Times-Union Guild (2018) newswriters unionized after experiencing “more uncertainty” when the GateHouse Media chain purchased the Florida newspaper. In 2020, other newswriters unionized as chain owners purchased their publications, too—including Lee Enterprises, which bought the *Roanoke Times* and *Laker Weekly*—while Ogden Newspapers acquired the *Lawrence Journal-World*. Unionization announcements criticize these chain owners, including Gannett, Lee, and Ogden, for limiting local control over the number of local journalists who are available for newsgathering and the budget for covering city and state politics. For example, Lee had allegedly been “siphoning away profits instead of investing in local news, sending those profits to corporate offices to reward top executives for stripping down the newspapers” (Southern Illinoisan News Guild 2018). As Hudson Valley News Guild (2021) puts it, “[L]ocal autonomy has vanished, along with staff, in the name of regionalization” due to such chain ownership control, signaling impacts of the financialization critique narrative. As the unionization efforts progressed over time and the wider implications of industry financial issues became clearer, some unions gradually shifted their framing of a journalism crisis narrative.

From 2020 to 2022, a period marked by increasing financial pressures, unionization announcements raised greater concerns through the financialization critique narrative. This narrative focused on the growing influence of hedge fund owners and the accompanying austerity measures, particularly highlighting the impacts of takeovers by hedge fund chain owners, including Chatham and Alden (Abernathy 2022). TNG-represented unions also typically invoked this narrative, given that many of its members work at hedge-fund owned newspapers, where financial instability and cost-cutting have become more pronounced. According to The Packet/Gazette Guild (2020), Chatham has “no stake in our community or our future.” In other cases, unionization announcements express fears of a potential Alden takeover. For Orlando Sentinel Guild (2020), “Alden has been called the ‘grim reaper’ and ‘Darth Vader’ of the newspaper industry because it harvests its properties for short-term profit and leaves the carcasses to rot.” Interviewee 1 explains that their coworkers had experienced “a parade of terrible, irresponsible ownership groups that clearly do not care even a little about the wellbeing of their employees and people are afraid of layoffs.” These factors raise potential concerns over newswriters’ attempts to fulfill journalism’s democratic mission through their labor. This evolution in framing illuminates unions’ broader understanding of and response to changing industry dynamics, rather than merely adherence to a single journalism crisis narrative.

Third, unionization announcements emphasized the social and economic threats of the COVID-19 pandemic to the media industry. This CAF was prominent among both TNG- and WGAE-represented unions, extending and reinforcing the business-oriented narrative, as the widespread impact of the pandemic exacerbated the existing industry financial instability. Interviewee 4 stresses that organizing during a pandemic and lockdowns was “a time of huge economic uncertainty, where the company was extremely on high alert as it regarded funds and people’s compensation packages and advertisers.” Within a month of the World Health Organization’s announcement in March 2020, VTDigger Guild (2020) went public: “The coronavirus epidemic has ... heightened the fragility of our industry.” Likewise, for PEOPLE Magazine Union (2020) digital employees, “The coronavirus pandemic has added unprecedented turbulence to an already turbulent industry.” By the end of 2020, unionization announcements, including Meredith Union’s (2020), echoed these feelings of increasing precariousness during the pandemic: “With the unpredictable impact of the coronavirus pandemic—a destabilizing force in an already turbulent industry—we feel even more heavily the weight of our vulnerable position.” COVID-19 intensified and made more noticeable longstanding industry precariousness and injustice vis-à-vis the political-economy master frame. Overall, the unions highlighted media financing struggles, media ownership turmoil, and the COVID-19 pandemic, using the political-economy master frame, while reinforcing the perception of an increasingly precarious industry mainly through the business-oriented narrative.

The Dominant Labor-Oriented Journalism Precarity Narrative

Regarding the labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative and diagnostic framing shaped by the occupational-identity master frame, unionization announcements emphasized the impact of industry instability and austerity measures, which have led

to significant workforce downsizing. Unlike the shift identified between the business and financialization narratives, unions consistently drew on the precarity narrative, which was dominant throughout the period under study. Similarly, both TNG- and WGAE-represented unions incorporated elements of this precarity narrative. They link understandings of a structural crisis mentioned above to employees' working conditions. For Interviewee 5, these factors "trickle down into the function of the day to day ... work environment." Unionization announcements foreground a decrease in newsroom employment, as chain and hedge fund-owned and controlled journalism companies have laid off staff, offered buyouts, consolidated jobs, or required unpaid furloughs. To reduce organizational spending, companies have "dramatically downsized, cutting costs" (One Herald Guild 2019). Interviewee 6 explains further that over the past 22 years, the publication's work process and communication materials have become increasingly "electronic ... especially in the last two years when no one is actually in the same room anymore"; they add, "It gives you the ability to do greater things, but it also means you use less people to do it. I've seen the workforce shrink dramatically since I started in the company." Offering numerical evidence, unionization announcements capture this downward employment trend of the "austerities" of corporate chain and hedge fund decision-making (Heart of NoCo News Guild 2020). Timesland News Guild (2020) claims that Warren Buffet's Berkshire Hathaway Media Company had cut the *Roanoke Times* and *Laker Weekly* newsrooms by nearly 50% between 2013 and 2020 before Lee bought them. Newsrooms are perceived to be under threat within a rapidly changing media industry due to such dwindling employment.

Overall, this article understands such job loss as not "normative failure" (Siegelbaum and Thomas 2016, 400) but rather *normative precariousness*. Such "gutted" newsrooms may limit the extent to which publications could cover local issues and represent their communities (APP-MCJ Guild 2021). For instance, the *Island Packet* and *Beaufort Gazette* once had 40 reporters to cover Beaufort County, but by 2020, they had fewer than 15 reporters, forcing them "to pass over coverage that once made our newspapers unique" (The Packet/Gazette Guild 2020). Job cuts make newswriters less able to provide quality local journalism coverage and "difficult to provide the news that our readers demand and deserve" (Record-Courier News Guild 2021). These cuts strike at journalism's core democratic mission: "to inform the community" (Lawrence Journal Workers Guild 2020).

Second, unionization announcements communicate concerns about job security. They suggest that local newsroom employees are worried about increased workloads, being underpaid, looming threats of being furloughed, and pay decreases for accepting more work responsibilities without pay raises. Interviewee 7 describes this environment guided by an ethos of "work, work, work" and a daily expectation of content "churn on the website." Within this context, Dallas News Guild (2020) writes, "This tumult has resulted in no-raise promotions, increased work without increased income, staffing cut to the bone and, most recently, an across-the-board reduction in pay." Interviewee 8 explains that after layoffs at their workplace, coworkers were concerned over job security and that their working conditions changed, "making us do more" for the same pay: "it just felt like constant people leaving, not being replaced." Unionization announcements, like those by Hudson Valley News Guild and APP-MCJ

Guild, also stress that newswriters' pay rates might not reflect the high costs of living and healthcare. Some unionization announcements conclude that staff "struggle to effectively report on the news that matters" (The Record Guild 2021). Overall, unionization announcements link such precarious work to industry precariousness: "It's an era when simple comforts like a newsroom are not guaranteed" (Daily News Union 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic also raised concerns among newswriters regarding workplace protections, drawing more attention to layoffs, buyouts, and unfilled positions, which could put at risk quality local news coverage. For instance, Interviewee 9 said that COVID-19 raised the alarm: "We needed to basically get our shit together and go public sooner rather than later" to be insulated from more layoffs. Additionally, Gannett unionization announcements express this uncertainty about the future of newswriters' jobs, including New Jersey-based APP-MCJ Guild (2021): Gannett "invited" producers and reporters to "reapply for their jobs" as the company restructured during the pandemic. Gannett newswriters at the Hudson Valley News Guild (2021) also reveal a contradiction and power imbalance, demonstrating how financialization has shaped the workforce: "The Gannett CFO was given a \$600,000 bonus for working through the pandemic. We were given the 'collective sacrifice' of unpaid furloughs, a vanishing 401(k) match, and advice on buying bike helmets to cover protests." Unionization announcements suggest that further job cuts during the pandemic could create more local newsroom deserts and leave journalism's democratic mission unfulfilled. As Washington State NewsGuild (2020) put it, "In addition to losing the reporting that empowers them to make informed decisions about their lives, the loss of local newspapers leaves communities vulnerable to 'casual endemic corruption' when journalists are not there to serve as a watchdog on government." Job loss and insecurity could put at risk journalism's critical informational and public service role, contributing to normative precariousness. While local news deserts are another dimension of the business-oriented narrative (Abernathy 2022), unionization announcements established that newsroom deserts have become a marker of a labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative; they provide clear evidence of how unions draw on a discursive repertoire to remix elements from competing crisis narratives and create a new hybrid union-oriented crisis narrative (Steinberg 1999a).

Establishment of the Hybrid Union-Oriented Local Journalism Crisis Narrative

This study situates those uses of competing crisis narratives and master frames within their production context to illuminate how organizing committees contributed to the construction of a hybrid union-oriented local journalism crisis narrative. It understands frame construction within an internal organizational process shaped by power relations among organizing committee members, a bargaining unit's wider membership, and parent union representatives vis-à-vis an employer. Interviewees reveal that organizing committees explicitly discussed and drew upon a repertoire (Steinberg 1999a). They also suggest that unionization announcement injustice-frame construction itself is guided by the occupational-identity master frame and draws on the principle of democracy.

First, union organizing committees imported and adapted communicative practices from a wider discursive repertoire informed by the occupational-identity frame. Interviewees indicate that organizing committees read model unionization announcements and a template of key points that they could include. For example, Interviewee 10 notes that the union provided a skeleton and template of key goals that organizing committees could potentially incorporate and offered them editing suggestions for tone. She said that this process was also facilitated by the “very public” and visible nature of the organizing online launched by Gawker Union in 2015, making resources widely accessible for future organizing initiatives.

WGAE and TNG organizing committee members explicitly acknowledged that their parent union and other bargaining units provided them with such communicative practices that they could use. For instance, Interviewee 8 recalls that their union organizer told them they “needed” a unionization announcement with their mission and gave them examples. Interviewee 11 says that the previous unionization efforts offered “ready-made explanations for people” on what language to include in unionization announcements and “made it easy to explain why in a concise way.” Due to the instability of newswork, job loss, and insecurity, some workers’ organizing experiences at one workplace were also shaped by their organizing experiences at previous workplaces. Interviewee 12 helped organize a union in 2016: “When I was laid off from [my previous media company] I had made a promise to myself that wherever I land next, I am going to start a union if there’s not already one there.” Their precarious work experience was shared by other interviewees, providing them with additional ready-made templates for communicative unionism when organizing their future workplaces.

With union announcements being publicly available online, interviewees also emphasize the importance of carefully choosing their words and tone, echoing Interviewee 10’s guidance. Interviewee 13 explains that their union stressed the need for its communication to be “direct,” “honest,” “clear,” and “civil ... to help garner a good public image.” Similarly, Interviewee 4 recalls the union’s focus on maintaining a “firm voice that was fair ... level-headed and knowledgeable, but clear” in its public online communication. Their union was conscious of its tone, reflecting a wider awareness of the public-facing nature of unionization announcements.

Second, organizing committees created unionization announcements through a democratic process underpinned by the occupational-identity frame. Organizing committee members drew on their unique occupational skills, using them for an alternative purpose: writing a unionization announcement. Interviewee 14 said that it was “helpful ... to draw on our skills that we use in our everyday work to make sure that it was a powerful statement.” In other interviews, union members typically said that their wider bargaining unit membership agreed to let a core group or one member draft their unionization announcement, dividing up the workload, like they do in their everyday work. They collaboratively edited it in a shared Google Doc, inviting other members for their input and approval, sometimes over a Zoom call or a bargaining unit’s secret Slack space. For Interviewee 5, their completed unionization announcement reflected the organizing conversations that coworkers were already having for several months. Ultimately, each organizing committee finalized their own statement, which Interviewee 10 said is important for democratic union organizing, especially

for writers who always “wanted to have the final say.” Despite the benefits of collective and collaborative input for organizing, many interviewees highlight that it was challenging to have “a lot of cooks in the kitchen,” as Interviewee 5 put it. For Interviewee 14, this challenge was unsurprising, considering they are all writers and editors who are “picky” about the “minutia of every word,” which reflects the individualistic artistry of the journalistic profession (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2016). Interviewee 15 also emphasizes that journalists “care about words” and “the power that they can have.” Considering this context, it seems plausible that organizing committees drew on a discursive repertoire (Steinberg 1999a), including the occupational-identity master frame and principle of democracy to shape the union-oriented crisis narrative in their unionization announcements.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals that unionization announcements do not simply accept a single, dominant local journalism crisis narrative. Instead, they introduce a hybrid union-oriented narrative that reflects unions’ heterogeneous perceptions of industry and workforce changes, tailored to the unique circumstances of the newswriters represented by a particular union. This hybrid narrative incorporates elements from the competing business-oriented (Abernathy 2022; McChesney and Nichols 2022), financialization (Almiron-Roig 2011), and labor-oriented narratives (Cohen 2016) to varying degrees, notably emphasizing labor-oriented concerns. In using framing to communicate this narrative, frame transformation was more common than frame extension (Benford and Snow 2000). This prevalence reflects the unions’ strategic communication efforts to not just extend existing narratives but also reshape them, leveraging their discursive power to potentially influence industry discourse and highlight structural changes that address precarity (Geelan 2022). It also reinforces the unions’ perception that fair labor conditions are important in fulfilling journalism’s democratic role (Bibby 2014; Salamon 2020). By reframing the discourse, unions strategically shift the public focus online toward critical issues, including job security and financialization. This communicative framing approach underscores the unions’ long-standing interests in securing better pay and professional standards (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2016; Salamon 2023a), while also adopting contradictory and conciliatory business-oriented managerial discourse to resonate more with employers and other newswriters (Rothstein 2019; Steinberg 1999a). Additionally, while unions’ online communication strategies could potentially challenge discursive power (Geelan 2022), they may not transform the status quo.

Regarding RQ1, unionization announcements diagnostically communicated industry changes in relation to the business-oriented local journalism crisis narrative and financialization narrative critiquing it. First, facilitating frame extension (Benford and Snow 2000) and discursive adaptation (Barranco and Molina 2021), my findings align with existing literature on the business-oriented local journalism crisis narrative, emphasizing the industry’s volatility (Abernathy 2020, 2022; McChesney and Nichols 2022; Pickard 2011, 2020). They also align with the financialization narrative critiquing it, foregrounding impacts of hedge fund ownership (Almiron 2013; Almiron-Roig 2011; Winseck 2011). Through their CAFs, unionization announcements highlight how

newsworker unions' frames regarding industry changes are similar to those of media companies. By highlighting political and economic turbulence, announcements depict the industry as unstable and uncertain due to continuous financial decline and ownership changes, straining newsworkers' ability to serve local communities and uphold journalism's democratic mission.

Second, these announcements contribute to frame transformation (Benford and Snow 2000). They modify the discourse surrounding the business-oriented local journalism crisis narrative and narrative critiquing it, introducing *industry precariousness*. They highlight newsworkers' unique values and interests to modify the CAFs regarding media financing and ownership. For the unions, precariousness signifies a widespread and longstanding condition affecting the industry, companies, and media owners themselves, which has become more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unionization announcements emphasize the influences of financialization—chain and hedge fund ownership (Almiron 2013)—and algorithmic culture during the pandemic (García-Avilés 2021). These factors have further exposed and exacerbated this generalized condition of industry precariousness since 2020.

Concerning RQ2, unionization announcements diagnostically communicated newswork changes vis-à-vis the labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative. First, advancing frame extension (Benford and Snow 2000) and discursive adaptation (Barranco and Molina 2021), my findings align with previous research on the labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative. They suggest that union members feel uncertain about the future of their employers and careers (Ekdale et al. 2015). Unionization announcements depict a shrinking workforce and deteriorating working conditions, which limit newsworkers' ability to adequately inform local communities and fulfill journalism's democratic mission (Bibby 2014; Cohen 2016; Salamon 2020). They suggest that these conditions could contribute to normative failure (Siegelbaum and Thomas 2016).

Second, these announcements foster frame transformation (Benford and Snow 2000). They reshape the discourse surrounding the labor-oriented journalism precarity narrative, advancing *normative precariousness*. They emphasize that job loss and insecurity may limit the extent to which publications could cover local issues and represent their communities. Normative precariousness foregrounds newsworkers' inability to effectively fulfill journalism's normative democratic mission, providing a public service role while enabling newsworkers to deliver high-quality local news coverage (Christians et al. 2010; McChesney and Nichols 2022; Pickard 2020). Furthermore, these announcements reinforce the historical significance of newsworkers' unions as craft guilds, prioritizing key union demands, including fair pay, working conditions, and professional standards (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2016; Salamon 2023a). However, they also underscore the contemporary challenges and disruptions faced by the *media* industry at the meso and macro levels, indicating a shift in the rhetorical scope and tactics employed by *newsworker* unions. They reveal that unions' rhetoric uniquely foregrounds how newsworkers' labor conditions impact journalism's democratic mission and public good role (Bibby 2014; Cohen 2016; Salamon 2020).

Regarding RQ3, the research suggests that journalism crisis narratives are context-dependent, influenced by the perspectives and interests of the stakeholders who (re)frame them, their distribution of discursive power, and are situated within a discursive repertoire (Steinberg 1999a). They are also shaped by online

communicative mediation. Communicative unionism highlights “framing and staging disputes in the public arena” (Però and Downey 2024, 144) through online discourse (Salamon 2023b). It underscores the impact of virtual unionism and social media on framing since the digital era (cf. Benford and Snow 2000; Gahan and Pekarek 2013). Additionally, my conception of *communicative framing* emphasizes the importance of understanding the *internal organizational process* behind these online frames, revealing how frames are constructed, extended, and transformed *in practice* (Carragee and Roefs 2004).

In sum, newsworker unions initially recognize the dominant business-oriented journalism crisis narrative but still present varied perspectives. Unionization announcements reframe industry and newswork changes beyond “the extreme brevity of financial memory” (Almiron-Roig 2011, 44). They attribute these changes not only primarily to the rise of social media platforms or steady decline of revenues and profits since the 2010s. *By acknowledging the longstanding impacts of hedge fund media ownership on newswork, unions reshape narratives, revealing a union-oriented crisis narrative that emphasizes financialization, industry-wide precariousness, and normative precariousness.* The union-oriented crisis narrative reflects a form of craft unionism, which addresses critical issues, but tends to focus on securing decent pay, professional standards, and the artistic integrity of the journalistic profession (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2016). Consequently, this narrative can discursively perpetuate the status quo by foregrounding newsworkers’ occupational identity and conciliatory approaches, rather than effectively challenging the broader structural forces shaping different industries (Rothstein 2019; Steinberg 1999b). By contrast, class-based unionism prioritizes cross-craft and cross-industry solidarity beyond journalism (Mosco and McKercher 2008), which could challenge financialization and commercialization by diagnosing these forces as fundamental issues across diverse industries (Almiron-Roig 2011). Class-based unionism has the potential to foster broader collaboration among industry actors, inspire wider institutional changes, and safeguard local journalism’s democratic role. Class-based unionism could serve as the basis for a robust critique of the status quo by moving beyond the focus predominately on occupational identity and integration of newsworker- and business-oriented discourse.

Certain limitations of this study could be addressed in future research. The analysis is restricted to public-facing unionization announcements published on union websites and Twitter accounts from 2015 to 2022. These announcements reflect unions’ outward-facing priorities at the time of writing, so internal union communication is excluded. The interviews with union members help contextualize and expand upon the announcements, providing insights into unions’ private and evolving organizational priorities. However, they are mainly supplementary and do not account for individual union members’ perceptions. Furthermore, while the sample offers a comprehensive view of TNG’s and WGAE’s digital news media unionization efforts, it is not representative of all newsworkers or unions in the industry. For example, broadcast news media workers who have often joined SAG-AFTRA are excluded, as their union communication was less frequently made public. Additionally, this article’s focus on US-based journalism unions limits the ability to generalize the findings to other media industries and countries.

This article has implications for future research. Researchers could examine journalism crisis narratives of other stakeholders, including journalism trade bodies, workers' professional associations, nonunionized newswriters, and audiences. Additionally, researchers could apply this article's integrated communicative framing framework to analyze workers' online communication in other digital industries, such as how gig economy platform workers and social media influencers, use online platforms to frame diverse industry issues. By applying this framework to various industries and labor contexts, researchers could gain more insights into the evolving dynamics of digital labor communication and strategies workers use to navigate their industries.

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