

Reporters gain security with union contracts in digital newsrooms

By Sam Smucker

As the digital media newsroom matures, newsroom staff members are turning to a decidedly old-school way of dealing with their employers: labor unions.

| | Union Recognized by Management |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| The Gawker (Gizmodo) | August 2015 |
| Vice News | August 2015 |
| Salon | August 2015 |
| ThinkProgress | September 2015 |
| Huffington Post | December 2015 |
| Slate | March 2016 |
| Fusion (Gizmodo) | Nov 2016 |
| The Root (Gizmodo) | Jan 2017 |
| Thrillist | March 2017 |
| The Intercept | April 2017 |
| Vice Video Employees | Sept 2017 |
| DNAInfo/Gothamist | November 2017 |

Since the summer of 2015 a series of union organizing drives has resulted in more than 500 new union members among reporters, writers and editors at more than a dozen popular outlets such as the Gawker, MTV News, Huffington Post, Salon, Slate, Vice and the Guardian U.S. And in September, unions representing more than 300 staff and freelance employees at Vice Media, a popular millennial news and entertainment website, were recognized by management.

This is a surprising development in an industry that has long relied on the precarious employment of freelance workers and even free crowd-sourced content. But, this is not your mother and father's labor movement.

Most of these newsrooms are not organizing with the Newspaper Guild, the traditional paper of hardboiled big-city news

reporters. Instead they are organizing with the Writer Guild of America-East, the union of New York television writing rooms that brings a sense of youth and celebrity to union organizing. At Vice Media, WGAE worked with the Editors Guild/IATSE Local 700 to organize both the writers and video editors.

Mike Elk, a now-independent journalist involved in organizing drives at In These Times and Politico, says the Newspaper Guild (which recently changed its name to NewsGuild) has an older culture.

“It’s run by reporters who cut their teeth in the newsrooms of the 1980s” and who have spent the last 20 years fighting off digital media and its devastating effects on print media. WGAE, he says, has a younger culture. Even the NewsGuild name-change suggests the union is adapting to the digital age.

In August, 2015, writers at the Gawker organized a union, demanded recognition and quickly won a contract. The Gawker’s stature as a well-know digital media news source and the successful contract opened the flood-gates.

Daniel Marans, a Huffington Post active in the union drive there, said, “The first conversation we had about unionizing took place shortly after Gawker unionized... We sensed that there was momentum in the industry and we did not want to be the last one aboard the train.”

Marans explains that Huffington Post employees unionized because “we were looking for some security and peace of mind in a volatile industry. We’ve experienced many layoffs and reorganizations by management – sometimes problematic, always sudden and disruptive. We were also very concerned about a pay scale we saw as arbitrary and scattershot. There were people who had been promoted in title but not in pay and were earning less than people with fewer responsibilities. There were many people who simply were not earning enough.”

Another unique aspect of this organizing is most of the union drives receive voluntary recognition from the employer, meaning workers aren't subjected to extended anti-union campaigns to dissuade them. Instead, once a majority of the staff sign union cards, the workers and the union approach the company to recognize the union and begin negotiations.

This is not the case in typical private-sector workplaces. Elk recently reported on a company in Georgia that used "psychological warfare" against employees attempting to organize with the Steelworkers union by keeping them in anti-union meetings for two to three hours per day. When the union lost by 28 votes, the company immediately fired one of the union activists.

Elk said, "There are different rules for organizing at digital media companies. Workers are able to live-tweet anti-union meetings to [a] large audience" they have cultivated through their work. This give them additional leverage and protection. Furthermore, because these sites serve niche audiences, unlike big city newspapers, the readership might be nearly 100 percent pro-union, so an attempt to defeat the union would be a public-relations problem for the company with its readers.

Wage increases for the lowest paid

The new union contracts have generally provided wage increases especially for the lowest paid. At Vice, the WGAE reported some writers will receive 30 percent pay increases during their three-year contract, including a \$45,000 minimum salary and time-off for employees who must work over the weekend. Similarly, at Huffington Post the union won across-the-board wage increases every year and a minimum-pay level which caused the lowest-paid employees to get double-digit pay raises.

Generally, the new WGAE contracts have somewhat weaker work rules than do the print contracts, which provided overtime

pay, seniority rights and no firing without just cause. All of these issues are subject to negotiations. When Huffington Post laid off employees last year, the contract did not require management follow seniority. Weaker work rules are typical of new union contracts in general; in first contracts workers are primarily concerned with making gains in pay fairness.

On the issue of seniority at Huffington Post, Marans said, "That was a decision on our [the union members'] part. All of these things are decisions we make in conjunction with the union. The Writer's Guild was always open to us saying we wanted to push harder for something. But we almost went on strike over pay, so a big part of it is how willing people are to go to the barricades."

Marans adds, "We hope to make gains every time we go to the table." He also pointed out that he and his coworkers would not want to restrict themselves with strict job descriptions, for instance, that might prevent writers from dabbling in video editing or video editors occasionally writing copy.

Editorial transparency and newsroom diversity have been raised during several of the organizing drives, including MTV, Slate and Huffington Post. Marans said, "We got new measures to protect editorial integrity, including mandatory disclosure of corporate partnerships other than standard advertising and a rule forbidding the diversion of ordinary reporters for duties that could be considered "advertorial" or in pursuit of the business interests of the company or one of its top executives."

Organizers have not always been successful, though. Organizing drives at important outlets such as Politico and BuzzFeed stalled in the face of employer opposition. Some of the largest digital newsrooms remain non-union; most notably Bloomberg, where a source there suggested there has been little talk of unionization for more than a decade. In November, the New York office of DNA Info/Gothamist, a 14

year-old local news site, voted for the WGAE. In response, the owner, Joe Ricketts, shut down the entire operations across the country and removed all articles from the internet. He said his decision was a direct result of the employees decision to unionize.

Nevertheless, more than one-dozen successful organizing drives in a couple of years is impressive. And, solid gains in pay and working conditions give union organizers something to talk about with a new generation of non-union reporters.