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## Review of the book *Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media*

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## Review of the book *Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media*

### Abstract

[Excerpt] Observers of the U.S. media have grown accustomed to the perennial debate over whether the news leans left or right. Yet there is scant disagreement that discussion of ordinary work issues is absent in public discourse; that workers and their unions are practically invisible even in economic news; and that most news coverage about unions concerns strikes, corrupt leaders, or, more recently, splits in labor's ranks.

Christopher Martin's highly readable book, *Framed: Labor and the Corporate Media*, deepens that observation through the application of *media framing theory*, originally developed by political media scholar Doris Graber in the 1970s. Quoting Todd Gitlin, Martin defines media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual." Embattled union members encounter framing when every airline walkout becomes a media narrative of stranded travelers versus callous strikers, and every press story employment focuses on stock statistics.

### Keywords

labor movement, media, media framing theory, unions

### Disciplines

Unions

### Comments

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### Labor-Management Relations

*Framed! Labor and the Corporate Media.* By Christopher R. Martin. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press (an imprint of Cornell University Press), 2004. 248 pp. ISBN 0-8014-4198-6, \$45.00 (cloth); 0-8014-8887-7, \$19.95 (paper).

Observers of the U.S. media have grown accustomed to the perennial debate over whether the news leans left or right. Yet there is scant disagreement that discussion of ordinary work issues is absent in public discourse; that workers and their unions are practically invisible even in economic news; and that most news coverage about unions concerns strikes, corrupt leaders, or, more recently, splits in labor's ranks.

Christopher Martin's highly readable book, *Framed: Labor and the Corporate Media*, deepens that observation through the application of *media framing theory*, originally developed by political media scholar Doris Graber in the 1970s. Quoting Todd Gitlin, Martin defines media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual." Embattled union members encounter framing when every airline walkout becomes a media narrative of stranded travelers versus callous strikers, and every press story on unemployment focuses on stock statistics.

A small number of books in the past decade have critiqued the coverage of labor unions by the American media, and Martin acknowledges his debt to William Puette's *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor*, Michael Parenti's *Unreliable Sources*, and Jonathan Tasini's *Lost in the Margins*. According to Martin and his predecessors, the coverage of labor in the mainstream media is dismissive, slanted, and uniformly unflattering.

Martin argues that the rise of consumer culture in the twentieth century transformed the press's original "public sphere" role into a role completely dominated by consumer and commercial interests, resulting in the modern media's inability to report on labor fairly. This insight is not original, owing a lot to cultural and media critics such as James Cary and Stewart Ewen. Martin applies the insight to unions by

identifying five common media "frames" contributing to the poor image of unions: (1) the consumer is king, (2) the process of production is not the public's business, (3) the economy is driven by great business leaders and entrepreneurs, (4) the workplace is a meritocracy, and (5) collective economic action is bad.

After an introduction chronicling the rise of organized labor and the concurrent rise of anti-labor corporate interests in the last century, Martin examines five case studies. First, he looks at the 1991–94 closing of the Willow Run Assembly Plant in Ypsilanti, Michigan. In particular, he analyzes the implicit collusion of the media in promoting concessionary "whipsawing" between Willow Run and a second UAW-organized plant in Arlington, Texas. GM threatened both plants with closing, and each UAW local and community maneuvered not to be the one closed. In Martin's view, GM's denial that it created this implicit competition between the two plants—a denial at odds with clear evidence of deliberate whipsawing—was given credibility by the media's disingenuous reporting.

Martin's second case focuses on the flight attendants' strike at American Airlines in 1993, where the media's myopic attention to the plight of stranded consumers—the predictable narrative in every airline strike—substituted for analysis of the issues. Notably overlooked was the stark contrast between the lot of flight attendants (low pay, shabby treatment) and that of airline executives (bloated salaries, extravagant perks).

The 1994–95 Major League Baseball strike provides Martin's third case. He argues that the drumbeat from the media about the victimized fans drowned out examination of the underlying business of baseball, whose owners are protected by a Supreme Court anti-trust exemption dating from 1922. The union's resistance to a salary cap that would have changed the power balance between players and owners was turned by the media into a "millionaires versus billionaires" slugfest with the hapless fans and broken-hearted Little Leaguers in the middle. The actual economic and legal reasons behind the battle were lost.

In Martin's fourth case study, the 1997 UPS Teamsters strike, labor actually subverted the relentlessly commercial frame of the media. The union took one of the consumer frames, "production is none of the public's business,"

and turned it on its head, capitalizing on the personal relationship many television viewers had with their own UPS delivery person. They won the strike by winning the battle for the public's hearts and minds. The Teamsters were assisted in this coup by an unwitting UPS, which had used its workers' positive image and good relationships with customers in its own marketing efforts for "Big Brown."

In Martin's final case, the 1999 "Battle of Seattle" protests against the World Trade Organization, unions joined environmentalists, youth, and social justice advocates. Martin explores the imbalance between pro- and anti-WTO comments in the media, and then examines the transformation of the story of largely peaceful demonstrations into the story of a street fight between beleaguered Seattle cops and a small number of black-masked anarchists. At the end of the book, Martin makes several suggestions about how to strengthen the labor movement's efforts to achieve better coverage in the media.

While Martin's book is by far the strongest and best-documented application of media theory to the situation of U.S. labor, and a successful close reading of the media coverage of these cases, it suffers from several problems. It reads at times too much like a complaint that the media "just aren't being *fair*." His discussion of the role of journalism needs a firmer grounding in political history, media history, and democratic theory. There was no golden age of journalism when the media were fair, even after the Hutchins Commission called for journalistic "neutrality" in 1947. The media simply open up space for the fight between opposing interests. News is contested rhetorical terrain in a pluralist democracy, and labor's coverage is bad because it has not contested successfully on that terrain. Martin's analysis of a consumer frame is helpful, but it is ultimately only descriptive.

The book also lacks a critique of labor's own weak efforts to influence the media. Unions routinely ignore the press, consider it an afterthought, or address it solely as a source for publicity. Except in rare instances, unions do not train their members to talk to their local press or use their community radio or public access channels. Unions have failed to develop either an understanding of the media or a strategy for dealing with it, and show a stubborn unwillingness to develop their own media. This failure is especially glaring now, with the proliferation of low-power radio and the low cost of web portals. Unions are not going to change the corporate control and consumer frame of

the media. How they wrest control of that framing and begin to talk about their issues on their own terms, with their own media, is their challenge. Some of the harshest criticisms of Andy Stern, the president of the secessionist service workers union, have been that he is a self-promoting publicity hound. Labor needs more of that, not less. If Martin believes his own hypothesis, that the media disadvantage unions by using frames like "the economy is driven by great business leaders and entrepreneurs," where are those entrepreneurial union leaders and members who could be articulate, no-holds-barred advocates for America's workers?

A third weakness of the book is the absence of any discussion of class. Class as a cultural category is unmined territory in understanding the behavior and appeal of the American media. Most American media pitch content to the consumer elite—the young, upper middle class suburban demographic—and often mock or satirize working class, rural, or ethnic cultural characteristics. American labor leaders rarely discuss class. American politicians pillory each other for doing so. Labor's early successes came from its roots as a working-class social movement with powerful demands for fairness and decent living standards. The current image of labor as narrowly self-interested feeds into the media's efforts to frame and marginalize unions, efforts that rely on a denial of the historic role of labor in fighting for social justice. The success of the UPS strike came from the Teamsters who were out front talking about their lives, their jobs, their families. They were presenting compelling images of their own class narrative. Labor's framing will change when new union members—Latinos, Asians, women, and youth, among others—are empowered by their collective strength to create their own narratives and speak for themselves, in their workplaces, in their unions, and in the media.

Commercial media are resolutely anti-labor. They are owned by very sophisticated corporate players committed to ensuring their own dominance, whether by eliminating their own unions (the *Detroit News* strike is a case study that would have strengthened the book), destroying or absorbing the competition, funding endowed chairs at elite schools of journalism to influence generations of young reporters, or creating their own museums to house workerless versions of media history. Their negative framing of labor should be no surprise. Labor's frame will change when the labor movement becomes a class-based movement again, when it represents all workers instead of just its members, when it organizes

the culture and media industries, and when it develops its own media.

*Framed* makes an important contribution to understanding how media framing works, and it clarifies in some ways why the American labor movement is shrinking and beleaguered. Rooting it in a sharper discussion of how and why the media operate the way they do, and what unions should do about it, would have made it stronger.

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