

## Teaching Media Quarterly

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Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 4

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2015

# Deconstructing Media Messages about Workers and their Unions

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### Recommended Citation

Bach, Amy, Bryan Mercer, and Rebecca Scotland Phillips. "Deconstructing Media Messages about Workers and their Unions." *Teaching Media Quarterly* 3, no. 1 (2015). <http://pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq/vol3/iss1/4>

*Teaching Media Quarterly* is published by the University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing.

*Teaching Media Quarterly*  
*Volume 3, Edition 1 (Winter 2015): Work and Media*

## **Deconstructing Media Messages about Workers and their Unions**

### **Overview and Rationale**

In the last 40 years we have seen a dramatic transformation in the nature of work and social life. Scholars have referred to this as a transformation to a neoliberal form of capitalism (Harvey, 2005; Robinson, 2006), which emphasizes the importance of private profit over community, and thus privileging the free market over social welfare, individual property over public institutions, and a reduced role of the state. The impact of this neoliberal logic is increasing inequality and a growing sector of poor and working people, in the U.S. and beyond, that struggle to make a living. This neoliberal logic, however, extends far beyond economics touching all aspects of social life from our media to our public education system. This transformation offers critical context for examining the consolidation of our media sector, the changing nature of journalism, the consequent lack of coverage or negative coverage of workers and their unions in mass media, and finally the changing nature of work in the U.S. and how this is portrayed by mass media.

Research has shown that workers, and unionized workers in particular, are almost always portrayed in a negative light by the mainstream media (Puette, 1992). Political scientist Michael Parenti (1993) [catalogued seven generalizations about the way the news media create anti-union messaging](#) – from painting workers as greedy, to omitting the salary of management, or depicting public officials as neutral. The growing trend towards stereotyping workers and worker struggles makes them easy to dismiss and plays a secondary role in the diminishing role of organized labor in American life across the last 70 years. In this unit we look closely at media about workers and we ask:

- Why are workers consistently portrayed negatively in mainstream media reporting?
- Why should the public care?
- What channels of information provide more accurate depictions of workers and their struggles?
- In an era of participatory media, in what ways are individuals and organizations creating alternative messages about work and workers?

The nuances of what is encompassed in the term media literacy has been defined in different ways by scholars and practitioners (Hobbs, 1998; Lewis & Jhally, 1998; Masterman, 1990; Macedo & Steinberg, 2007) but most agree that it can be defined as the ability to “access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a wide variety of forms” (Aufderheide, as cited in Hobbs, 1998, p. 16). The assignments in this unit lesson are, at their core, assignments that engage students in the study and practice of media literacy.

This undergraduate unit has three central aims: to engage students in (1) analyzing mainstream media reporting in order to develop an understanding of mainstream media as a system that produces certain kinds of knowledge – knowledge that tends to be favorable to business-interests and individuals in positions of power (2) learning about independent and community media

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outlets that offer important counter-narratives to mainstream media reporting and the tools they employ to push back against powerful mainstream media messages and (3) examining how workers, and labor as a general topic, are portrayed in the media and why. These three goals will guide students towards developing a critical stance towards mainstream media coverage, particularly with respect to workers and their unions. This unit will also teach students about the new and changing economy, and the role of workers in this new economy.

### **General Timeline**

This unit was designed for a twice-weekly undergraduate class and can be completed in a three-week timeframe. While each of the class sessions can stand alone as individual lessons, the content of these sessions build on one another and together provide a more comprehensive examination of the mass media and the social construction of knowledge about work and workers in our society today. We understand this unit to offer instructors a general framework with lessons and discussion questions that can be truncated or expanded, depending on students' disciplinary fields of study and knowledge base, the goals for the course in which this unit may be incorporated, and the days and hours per week the course meets.

### **Detailed Lesson Plan**

#### Class Session 1 – Neoliberalism and Media Consolidation

Students will have come to class having read David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.

Since the 1980s our media has changed dramatically. According to Ben Bagdikian (2004) over the last 40 years corporate media ownership has shrunk from 50 companies that own and manage our media (TV, radio, books and magazines, Internet) to five or six companies. Students will be introduced to the core themes of the overall unit by examining the following images from Freepress.net that explain media consolidation, and discussing the implications of this media consolidation in small groups:

<http://www.freepress.net/blog/11/11/22/media-consolidation-illusion-choice><sup>1</sup>

Small group discussion questions:

- (1) What is neoliberalism and what evidence of it do you see in these Freepress graphics on media consolidation?
- (2) In your opinion, has the increasing number of cable television channels brought a diversity of content and viewpoints to the airwaves?
- (3) What are the implications of six companies controlling 90% of the media you see, hear, and read?

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<sup>1</sup> Note to students that this is a somewhat dated image as GE no longer owns own NBC, it merged with Comcast in 2012 and Time Warner no longer owns AOL. These updates provide further evidence of the constantly changing mass media landscape.

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After about 15 minutes of small group discussion, students will come back into a large group and share the content of their conversations.

The remainder of the class will be spent watching the 30-minute documentary by the Media Education Foundation, "[Rich Media, Poor Democracy](#)". This short film provides significant background information on the public airwaves, important regulatory acts by the FCC, and the relationship between mass media funding and media content.

Post-film large group discussion questions:

- (1) How does the structure of our mass media system shape media content?
- (2) What does the term "deregulation" mean and how has it contributed to the development of the media system in place today?
- (3) Discuss the relationship between deregulation and neoliberal logic as presented in the Harvey text.

In preparation for the next class session, students will read the Introduction of Manufacturing Consent by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, "[Journalism, Democracy, ... and Class Struggle](#)" by Robert McChesney and "[1994: The Old and Future Labor Beat](#)" by Murray Seegar. They will also bring a physical copy of a daily newspaper with them to the next class session.

## Class Session 2 – Media Consolidation and the Labor Beat

Fifty years ago, most medium- and large-circulation newspapers had full-time labor beat reporters (McChesney, 2000). In this class session, students will develop a general understanding of the ways in which journalism has changed over the past fifty years and why. Students will examine the physical copy of a daily newspaper they brought with them to class and record the title and content of any articles that cover the subject of labor. If there are stories about labor, students will closely examine the content of these articles, asking themselves the following questions:

- (1) Who was interviewed for this story (Employers? Employees? Public Officials?)
- (2) What is the story? That is, what is the problem or subject that is being reported?
- (3) Is any perspective privileged in the writing of this story? Whose? And how?

Students may work individually or in small groups on this assignment with other students who have brought the same newspaper. A large group discussion on their findings will follow this individual/small group work.

Next, the class will move to the university library for students to access newspaper archives from the 1940s. Students will select one issue of a newspaper, record the name of the periodical and specific date, and review the entire issue, recording any and all stories on labor and the content of these stories.

In preparation for the next class, students will come to class having read "[A Wolf in Scribe's Clothing: The SEPTA Strike and the Subterfuge of Philadelphia's Media Monopoly](#)" by Todd

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Wolfson, "[Labor and Unions in National TV Network News: Preliminary Summary Report](#)" by Federico Subervi, and the Introduction to *Through Jaundiced Eyes: How the Media View Organized Labor* by William Puette. Students will also share their findings from their library periodical search at the next class session, coming to class prepared to answer the same three questions above they used with the current daily newspapers they brought to class.

Class Session 3 – “Official” and “Unofficial” Knowledge: Developing a Critical Stance Towards Mainstream Media News Coverage

After a large group discussion sharing of their findings from their archival research on labor beat reporting, this class session will involve students in examining media coverage of the 2009 transit strike in Philadelphia in order to develop a critical understanding of the limitations of mainstream news reporting and the ways in which mainstream news reporting often privileges the voices of people in positions of power. By examining two different media texts on the transit workers’ strike, students will trace their developing understanding of the root causes of the transit strike and examine the ways in which biased and shallow coverage of an issue can skew public understanding. This session also provides a pathway for students to explore the different ways that individuals and organizations disrupt and subvert mainstream media texts and push back against powerful messages that paint inaccurate and partial pictures of the working class and poor.

Students will begin by watching two videos in class related to the 2009 Philadelphia transit strike and write their reactions to each video immediately afterward. [The first video](#) clip is of an interview between FOX news broadcasters and Philadelphia Mayor, Michael Nutter, at the onset of the SEPTA transit strike. The broadcast gives Mayor Nutter space to articulate the problem and the culprits, but offers no such space to workers or the transit union leadership. [The second video](#), also produced by MMP, presents the voices of transit workers themselves. The following list of questions will be asked of students after each video:

- (1) Comparing the texts, note the different relevant voices in this news event (both present and absent) and level of authority granted to each. How are these different voices articulating the root causes of the conflict between the transit workers and the City of Philadelphia?
- (2) How effective is this text in conveying knowledge about the transit workers strike? What information is present? What information is missing?
- (3) What words are used to describe workers in each video? How are workers portrayed?
- (4) How do you understand the different messages of these media texts in relation to what you know about the corporate mass media as a system and its impact on media content?

After watching each of the videos, students will break into small groups and discuss whether and how their understanding of the transit strike and their opinion of SEPTA workers may have shifted, as well as the role of independent media organizations in contributing to public knowledge about community issues.

In preparation for the next class session, students will read the Chicago Teachers Union report, "[The Schools Chicago Students Deserve: Research-Based Proposals to Strengthen Elementary](#)

[and Secondary Education in the Chicago Public Schools](#)”, and Chapter 1 (Understanding the Assault on Public Education) and Chapter 5 (Teacher Unionism 101) from Lois Weiner’s book, *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice*.

#### Class Session 4 – Scapegoating Workers: Deconstructing Mainstream Media Messages about the Role of Teachers Unions in Public School “Failure”

Public schools and public school teachers have been continuously and increasingly vilified in the mainstream media over the past decade. Arguably, this maligning of teachers and their unions has coincided with business and philanthropic interests in creating opportunities for “choice” via charter schools and publically funded vouchers programs for private school attendance. Much of this negative discourse centers on blaming the achievement gap on teachers alone and framing teachers unions as unnecessary and archaic entities that make unreasonable financial demands on school districts that solely exist for the benefit of their members. Research from the fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and history, as well as the current and past examples of the advocacy work of teachers unions however, paint a very different portrait (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Weiner, 2012; Chicago Teachers Union, 2012).

In this session, students will examine the role teachers unions have historically played, and continue to play, in advocating for optimal teaching and learning environments and developing systems of education for the larger public good. Students will contrast this history with popular mainstream media texts that negatively and singularly portray public school teachers and their unions as root causes of a host of problems that are mapped onto public schools today.

Students will begin by interrogating print-based and multimodal mainstream media texts discussing the failure of public systems of education and the perceived role of teachers unions in this failure.

Students will be divided into two groups: one group will skim through the recent Time Magazine cover story on teachers unions, “Bad Apples,” while the other group skims the 2008 cover story on then-Superintendent of the Washington D.C. Public Schools, Michelle Rhee. [Students will be asked to consider and take notes on the following questions while they read these articles:](#)

- (1) Who was interviewed in this article? Whose voices are heard?
- (2) How are teachers portrayed in the article? What specific words or images are used in reference to teachers?
- (3) According to this article, what is the problem/are the problems with public education today and what is the solution/are the solutions to this/these problems?
- (4) How do the texts by Lois Weiner and the Chicago Teachers Union complicate the portrait of school failure painted by these Time Magazine articles?

After reading these articles, students will share their notes in small group discussions. One person will be identified as the group note taker and will record the group’s conversation. The group will also work together to develop a concise summary of the article to share with the entire

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class. Students will then compare the content of these magazine articles to the texts they read for class by discussing the following questions as an entire class:

- (1) What does the Chicago Teachers Union report argue are the root causes of educational failure in their public schools?
- (2) How/does this report present a perspective on teachers unions that differs with the arguments presented in the Time Magazine articles?
- (3) According to Lois Weiner's text on teachers unions, what historically documented role have teachers unions played in developing positive learning environments for students and public systems of education more generally? Does understanding this history alter your perception of teachers unions, or unions more generally?

In preparation for the next class session, students will read Barbara Miner's "[The Ultimate Superpower: Supersized Dollars Drive Waiting for Superman Agenda](#)" and Joanne Barkan's "Got Dough?: How Billionaires Rule our Schools".

Class Session 5 – Scapegoating Workers: Deconstructing Mainstream Media Messages about the Role of Teachers Unions in Public School “Failure” (Cont...)

Students will divide into two new groups. One group will watch the film [Waiting for Superman](#) in the classroom and the other will watch the film [Won't Back Down](#) in a previously reserved room in the library. [Students will be asked to consider and take notes on the same set of questions used in the previous class with the Time Magazine articles while they watch these films:](#)

- (1) [Who is interviewed in this film/or which characters develop the film's storyline? Whose voices are heard in this film?](#)
- (2) How are teachers portrayed in this film? What specific words or images are used in reference to teachers?
- (3) According to this film, what is the problem/are the problems with public education today?
- (4) According to this film, what is the solution/are the solutions to this/these problems?

In preparation for the next class session, students will share their notes in small group discussions after viewing these films and synthesize the claims made in each film. One person will be identified as the group note taker and will record the group's conversation. The group will also work together to develop a concise summary of the film to share with the entire class in the next class session. Students will also read Chapters 1 (The Flat World, Educational Inequality, and America's Future) and 2 (The Anatomy of Inequality: How the Opportunity Gap is Constructed) in Linda Darling-Hammond's book, *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity will Determine our Future*.

Class Session 6 – Scapegoating Workers: Deconstructing Mainstream Media Messages about the Role of Teachers Unions in Public School “Failure” (Cont...)



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Students will begin by sharing their summaries of the films they watched during the previous class with the entire class, as well as the claims made by each film. Additionally, students will discuss the films they watched in relation to the texts they read for today's class that present research documenting the moneyed and anti-union interests invested in dismantling public systems of education

Students will then work in small groups to synthesize the claims made in these films with the foundational empirical scholarship from the field of education they have read over the past several class sessions (Barkan, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Miner, 2011; Weiner, 2012) and documents produced by actual teachers unions (Chicago Teachers Union, 2012) that identify a different and more complex set of factors that are responsible for the growing achievement gap. These factors include inequitable- and under-funded systems of public education, the growing number of students living in poverty and the impact of conditions of poverty on teaching and learning, the deprofessionalization of teachers and the growing rate of teacher turn-over, and the standardization of curricula and overemphasis on assessment as being responsible for educational inequity and the achievement gap. Small groups will discuss the following questions:

- (1) According to research compiled by Linda Darling-Hammond, what is the “opportunity gap” and how does it differ from the “achievement gap”? Why is the choice of one term over the other important and how do they each reflect a particular perspective on the problems that exist within public systems of education?
- (2) Given the debate surrounding public education and teachers unions in the mass media today, what does this empirical research teach us about problems in public education?
- (3) Given the different discussions about labor and the media we have been having in class, how do you understand mass media's vilification of teachers and their unions in relation to the drive to reform public systems of education?

This class will conclude with a large group sharing of small group discussions.

### Class Session 7 – Low-Wage Work and the Changing Economy

Low-wage work, particularly in the service sector, is often portrayed as temporary and entry-level. Popular conceptions of service sector work assume these types of jobs to be stepping stones towards future employment and ways for individuals – primarily teenagers and young adults – to “pull themselves up by their boot straps” as they move from these jobs into more stable and better paying employment. Little regard is often given to low-wage service sector workers who are older or who are trying to sustain families on their wages. These individuals are portrayed as deserving little for their unskilled labor and also at fault for their circumstances. Much weight and value is given to a college degree, even though the pathways to higher education are becoming less accessible as tuition costs rise and grants and aid for students with financial aid decreases. Popular discourse cautions that service sector work is a likely result of not going to college. The reality of low-wage service work, however, is quite different as the economy changes service sector work becomes the fastest growing type of employment.



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Employment options are becoming fewer, particularly for individuals without a college degree. For the increasing numbers of service workers who are older and supporting families, these jobs require workers sustain themselves and their families on poverty wages. Through this lesson students will examine representations of low-wage work in the fast food and restaurant industries, and interrogate the assumptions in these texts of workers and their needs.

As a large group, students will watch two different texts on low-wage service sector work. The first is a Fox News video titled “[Never Talk Down a Good Job](#)” from the July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013 broadcast of Neil Cavuto’s show, *Your World*.

The second is a [PBS Newshour video](#) by Hari Sreenivasan, broadcast on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 depicting one New York City family’s struggle to survive on a fast food salary.

While watching each of the videos students will take notes on the following questions:

- (1) How does this piece portray low wage workers?
- (2) What assumptions about the direction of the economy are present in the piece?

After watching both of the pieces students will discuss their observations in small groups and consider the following additional questions:

- (1) Compare the commentary on low wage service sector workers between these two pieces.
- (2) Do you believe you could live on minimum wage? What lessons about living on a minimum wage do these pieces present?
- (3) What do you suspect are the intended audience reactions for each text? How do these pieces together change your understanding of the minimum wage?
- (4) According to the text by David Harvey we read at the beginning of the unit, how/are these videos evidence of an economy shaped by neoliberal policies and practices?

The following activity can be started in class and continued by students individually at home. The class will relocate to a university computer lab where students will research three media texts produced by different sources, which feature stories of low-wage workers. Students should try to find at least one source produced by an organized group of workers. After finding these video texts, students will write a 1-page response answering the following questions:

- (1) Who produced each text, and what differences did you notice in how the texts portrayed workers? What do you think accounts for these differences?
- (2) What do you suspect are the intended audience reactions for each text?
- (3) Describe the power struggle that contextualizes each media text. In what ways do the texts account for this broader context, and an understanding of who holds more absolute power in the given situation?
- (4) If you were to conduct interviews with one of the low-wage workers featured in the text as well as their employer, what critical questions would you ask in order to better understand the source and nature of the conflict? In your interviews, how might you account for the uneven power dynamics?

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## **Biographies**

**Amy Bach** is an Assistant Professor of Literacy at the University of Texas at El Paso and the Co-Director of the Ethnography of Languages, Literacies, and Learning Lab there. Her research examines the intersection between literacy, civic engagement, and social change.

**Bryan Mercer** and **Rebekah Scotland Phillips** are Co-Executive Directors of the Media Mobilizing Project. The Media Mobilizing Project builds grassroots leadership to tell transformative stories that amplify and incubate community-led organizing for human rights and an end to poverty.