

Newspaper Industry

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY IN
THE NEWSPAPER GUILD . //

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INTRODUCTION

The 1970's were a time of difficulty for the nation's newspaper unions. Major technological developments took away craft union control over key production jobs with a shift of bargaining power from labor to management as employers learned they could operate mechanical departments with non-union help.

For The Newspaper Guild, the loss of craft union power meant a loss of strength among allies the Guild had considered essential for successful bargaining. At the same time, some of the same technological changes brought revised jobs and new bargaining issues to the Guild. Technology thus was a two-edged sword as far as the Guild was concerned. Its list of bargaining priorities was greatly increased by technology while its traditional allies were becoming less able--and maybe even less willing--to give craft muscle to Guild bargainers.

This paper proposes to take a look at the direct impact of technology on the Guild and the other newspaper unions, then a look at the indirect impact on the Guild and, finally, to examine possible Guild responses.

THE GUILD

Convention delegates of The Newspaper Guild will gather in Cleveland in 1983 to celebrate their union's 50th anniversary.

The Guild, youngest of the major newspaper unions, was founded in 1933 by New York columnist Heywood Broun. Journalists had in the past occasionally been the organizing target of the International Typographical Union (printers) but by and large it took the agonies of the Great Depression to convince them they had something in common with the coveralled workers in newspaper backshops. Organizers of the Guild in Minneapolis and St. Paul, who dispute Cleveland's claim to be the first Guild local, recall the events of 1933 that gave birth to the Guild there. A Minneapolis publisher called a city room meeting to announce a staff reduction and a pay cut for the survivors. When pressed for an explanation he told the reporters and editors that union contracts prevented cuts in the mechanical departments. He could effect savings only among white collar workers. The Guild was born.

Originally, Broun and his colleagues included only editorial employees in what they called the American Newspaper Guild (the name was changed years later to The Newspaper Guild, in recognition of the Guild's large Canadian membership). But Broun quickly saw that editorial employees, then as now, by themselves lacked the economic clout to deal with powerful publishers. Within four years the Guild expanded its jurisdiction to include all non-craft, or white collar, areas of a newspaper: editorial, advertising, business office and circulation.

Today the Guild, from its Washington, D.C. headquarters, claims over 33,000 members in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. There are 80 locals, 75 of them with contracts with one or more

publishers. It's usually "more" as the Guild has 205 contracts. Most are with newspapers; there are eight magazine agreements (Time, Inc. and Newsweek included), seven radio and TV contracts and in Puerto Rico a handful of agreements with companies completely outside the news business.

Interestingly, the current talk of organizing women offers no new challenge to the Guild. About 45% of its membership is women and the percentage is growing. Where the challenge is for the Guild is in bargaining away women's ghetto departments in newspapers. Historically there have been two such sexist ghettos in the nation's newspapers. The first has been in editorial, where women's page or "society" writers earned less than their male counterparts in the city room. Years of hard bargaining--with threats of EEOC suits--have virtually eliminated such second-class citizenship in editorial. The remaining challenge is to convince publishers to place more women (and minorities) in middle and top management. The second ghetto department, however, has not been susceptible to such solution. This problem area is called inside classified. There are basically two types of newspaper advertising. The first is display and includes the large, frequently illustrated ads run by firms like department or grocery stores. These ads are scattered throughout the news pages of the paper. This advertising is sold by outside sales people (historically male) paid at the Guild top pay rate along with reporters, editors, photographers and artists. The second type of advertising is classified, the page after page of small-type ads covering such classifications as help wanted, used car

sales and real estate listings. Classified is sold by two groups of employees. The first--usually calling on large auto and real estate firms--is outside classified sales (usually male) paid at the same high rate as display. The second and much larger group (a ratio of three to one over outside class is not unusual) is inside classified, or classified telephone sales. Historically these workers have been women, they work in a sweat shop atmosphere and are paid far less than outside sales. For example, at The Sacramento (California) Bee, outside sales people make \$540.72 a week, inside \$386.36. Since most Guild increases are on a percentage basis, the gap has continued to widen. A major Guild thrust in bargaining the last several years has been parity between inside and outside sales. Parity has not been achieved under any Guild contract yet, but a number of locals have bargained special extra increases for inside class to keep the inside-outside gap from growing.

Inside-outside parity is only one of several Guild issues that make cooperative or coordinated bargaining with newspaper craft unions difficult. Craft union members, with only one job classification and one pay rate, frequently grow impatient with the pace of Guild bargaining, often bogged down over such issues as parity long after the crafts are ready to reach final agreement on a single wage rate.

Other problem areas include non-economic issues related to journalistic ethics. Guild bargainers can spend days and weeks hammering away at such questions as a reporter's right to concur in major editing changes in a story, the right to refuse to slant

a story, the right to respond in print to critical reader letters, the right to have the publisher pay all costs of libel and other legal actions and the right to legal and financial backing when a reporter feels he or she must refuse to reveal to the courts or law enforcement agencies the identity of confidential sources. Beyond such ethics issues, the Guild, with its large number of female members, gives a great deal of bargaining priority to affirmative action and even to day care centers, priorities not always shared or even understood by craft union members.

The above description of the Guild and some of its unique bargaining issues and problems could be said to be fairly complete up until the 1970's. But then technology made a tremendous impact on the Guild and other unions with the introduction of the Video Display Terminal (VDT), also called the Cathode Ray Tube (CRT). The VDT in effect is a typewriter keyboard, a memory and a television screen. A writer composes his or her story on the keyboard. Instead of typed images on a sheet of paper the keyboarding produces a text on the TV screen. The writer can call up earlier material on the screen and use command keys on the keyboard to make revisions in the copy. When the VDT is linked to a central computer the VDT user actually produces the finished type for the production of the newspaper by releasing the material he or she has prepared from the VDT to the computer, which in seconds spits out long columns of camera-ready type ready for pasting up in full-page size sheets for electronic conversion into the printing plates that go on the newspaper's

presses.

The VDT's impact on newspaper bargaining has several dimensions. One is directly on the Guild as the work content of the Guild jurisdiction has changed and grown. The second--and most important--impact is on the composing room's International Typographical Union. The third dimension is the indirect impact on the Guild and other unions of how the VDT has radically changed the ITU.

To stay with the Guild for now, because the VDT-computer system bypasses or eliminates the typesetting and proofreading process in the old composing room, Guild members now are heavily involved with the final production processes. The reporter and editor now are the first and last step between the first draft of a news story and the final product for conversion to a printing plate for the presses. The inside classified sales person not only takes the customer's phone call and helps create the ad, she (rarely he) actually sets the type for the ad and may even set up the billing process for later use by the business office. Such job transformations and added responsibilities have brought worker demands for extra compensation. They also often have brought severe job-related problems because the VDT, marvel that it is, has usually been purchased and installed with little thought for the health and safety of the user.

As the flood of VDT's into news rooms and advertising and business departments began to crest about five years ago, electronics manufacturers, seeking volume sales, and publishers, with visions of reduced payroll costs dancing in their heads, met

employee concerns about VDT health and safety with answers dealing only with radiation. Few publishers showed interest in less dramatic questions about eye strain, fatigue, headaches and stress. For many VDT workers--both in and out of the newspaper industry--even management and government assurances that VDT's presented no radiation risks fell on deaf ears. At The New York Times, two copy editors developed cataracts after working in front of VDT's for several months. Both were in their mid-30's, an unusually young age for the eye disease. Again last year, several female workers in inside class in Toronto gave birth to infants with birth defects. The women had all been working in front of VDT's. In both New York and Canada, government investigators gave the VDT's a clean bill. But skepticism remains. The San Francisco-Oakland Newspaper Guild, in fact, purchased a lead apron for pregnant workers after the employer refused a worker's request, based on her doctor's advice, for an apron during her pregnancy. Guild bargaining proposals, therefore, usually include provisions for regular radiation testing.

But even if Guild members were to become convinced by government and corporate experts that the radiation danger in working with VDT's is "no worse than watching TV," the machines still present health problems. In a study conducted in the San Francisco-Oakland area, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health officially verified what the Guild's VDT veterans already knew. In improper environmental conditions VDT's can cause eye strain, visual distortion and fatigue, frequently manifesting itself in headaches and back pain. NIOSH,

which conducted its Bay Area study on petition of the Guild, the ITU, the office workers and several other unions, recommends that keyboards and screens be detachable and that chairs and desks be adjustable so that workers can find the most comfortable arrangement in which to work with the machines, and recommends that employees required to work in front of VDT's be given frequent work breaks away from the VDT's.

The NIOSH report is having the effect of causing Guild locals to push even harder for implementation by collective agreement of the NIOSH recommendations. It's a major bargaining priority in the Guild and, like inside-outside pay parity, is not one always understood by craft unions not familiar with or sympathetic to white collar problems.

Besides the VDT, another technological issue confronts the Guild. It is the "electronic newspaper." Currently five newspapers are experimenting with making contents of the paper available on home computer screens. The technology is available; the questions have to do with packaging, consumer acceptance and, possibly most important, reducing the cost to a marketable level. However, these first experiments, which began at the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch, have already been the major cause of a Guild strike last year at the Minneapolis Star and Tribune. The Minneapolis contract, like most in the Guild, contained a provision that whenever an employee's product was sold to an outsider for profit that employee would be reimbursed at a rate to be negotiated with the Guild. The clause originally had to do with paying a reporter or photographer for a story or picture sold to

another publication or news service, but the Minneapolis management obviously agreed with the Guild's interpretation that the clause would apply to selling newspaper contents to at-home electronic subscribers and forced a strike over the company demand to weaken the language. The Minneapolis strikers were forced to yield to a revision of the clause leaving resolution of the electronic resale issue to negotiations if and when the newspaper decides to move from experimenting to an actual profit-making venture.

Issues like VDT health, electronic newspaper resales, inside-outside parity and reporter integrity are all examples of the sort of non-bread-and-butter questions that can make it difficult for craft unions to understand, yet alone aggressively push under coordinated or cooperative bargaining. Such difficulty has tremendous impact on Guild bargaining because for years Guild strategists have recognized that much of whatever effective strike ability they have had comes in large part from the coattails of the crafts, which until recently have had a monopoly on their jobs skills with the resulting power to shut down a paper. The Guild's problem today is that as its own issues become more complex due to technological change, the crafts' power has been eroded by the same change.

THE ITU

Perhaps the most significant event in the shift of

bargaining power away from the unions came with the introduction of the VDT. Whatever the VDT has done to the Guild, the impact is much deeper in the composing room, where for almost a century, since the invention of the Linotype, members of the International Typographical Union reigned. Pre-VDT, copy arrived in the composing room on typed or handwritten sheets. Then highly skilled printers (more properly typographers as the actual "printing" of a paper is done by pressmen) operated the Linotype keyboard to cast copy line by line into hot metal type. When the type had cooled, other printers fit it into page-size forms. Those forms went to another department for conversion to metal plates to go on the printing presses.

But the VDT eliminated the Linotype and most of the highly prized skills of the composing room. As we have seen, the white collar worker (hopefully a Guild member) in the front office not only writes the story or the ad but, through the VDT, actually does the typesetting and proofreading once performed by printers. The white collar worker's efforts pour out of the computer system ready for paste up by printers, a job with skill levels far below those of the old craft.

In the early 1970's, the ITU faced this revolution by giving up "repo" work for job guarantees. Reproduction work clauses were originally bargained to keep typesetting work inside the composing room bargaining unit. The clauses had the effect of requiring that bargaining unit members set all the type even if the copy had come into the plant in a form ready for the plate-making processes. Such work from the outside could be used but

at some point the same copy would have to be reset, only then to be dumped, by an employee. By the arrival of the VDT, it would not have been unusual for a composing room to have had hundreds or thousands of hours of such repo work backed up awaiting unnecessary overtime.

Although printer locals, guided by their international, bargained away their repo, or bogus, right in exchange for lifetime job guarantees, the guarantees were usually for fewer jobs than previously held by the printers. Inducements for early retirement were offered and most guarantees were not for a certain number of jobs but to named individuals only, leaving room for attrition to further reduce the work force. The result of the job guarantee agreement usually was an immediate cut of as much as 50% in the number of printers working in a composing room. Those who remained had, in the words of labor reporter Abe Raskin, "more security than their publishers." But even if the ITU saved jobs for many members, it was badly crippled by the VDT. In New York, where the "Big 6" local had saved thousands of jobs in 1974, the length of the contract--until 1984--effectively eliminated the printers from a coalition strike strategy. In other printer locals, where there were more conventional two- and three-year agreements that expired simultaneously with those of other unions, the printers frequently were less likely to rally around a strike called by another union. The reason was that lifetime job guarantees dominated printer thinking and in some contracts the guarantees were subject to renegotiation in the event of a strike.

As the VDT revolution washed away ITU strength in the early 70's, the union reversed its traditional elitist attitude toward other unions and set out on twin courses. The first was to begin the move from craft union to industrial union by seeking to organize newspaper employees in white collar departments; the second was to open merger talks with the white collar Newspaper Guild. It did so against this background of decline:

The ITU's once bustling training center at its Colorado Springs headquarters, where aspiring printers once learned to set type, compose hot metal pages and make press room printing plates from the hot type, became a ghost city, the equipment idle, the classrooms empty and its membership roles declining. The ITU's ranks of active working members shrank from 98,471 in 1968 to 58,241 in 1978. By the end of 1980 the total had continued its plunge to 54,118, with the end not in sight. As printers with job guarantees died or retired, they were not replaced as publishers found that even after a 50% slash in composing room staffing they had more printers than needed. For example, a job guarantee agreement in the early 70's at the Stockton (California) Record had cut staffing from 130 to 36 guarantees. The figure since has been reduced to 30 by attrition and there continue to be indications the employer would like even further cuts. Beyond the declining need for printers, employers increasingly argue that the remaining printer jobs are overpriced. An executive at The Sacramento Bee, where the staff has been cut from 120 to 69, says he believes 90 percent of the remaining printer work can be done by inexperienced off-the-street hires

with only a couple of weeks of on-the-job training.

As the ITU suffered through its membership hemorrhage it also saw its role as economic leader among newspaper unions vanish. In 1950, ITU printer's wages averaged \$90.28 a week, \$1.66 more than the average for a Guild reporter. By 1960, the Guild reporter was averaging \$127.33, the printer \$122.23. At the end of 1980, the reporter earned \$420.21, compared to \$366.11 for the printer. A similar decline in craft pay as relates to Guild pay has occurred with the other major craft unions. At the end of 1980, reporters at the Fresno (California) Bee earned \$498.47 a week, printers \$410.90, pressmen \$412.20 and photo-engravers \$386.30.

THE PRESSMEN

As most ITU printer locals dealt with technological change by bargaining job guarantees, turning to organizing other workers and considering merger, the Pressmen's Union often met the future by fighting losing last-ditch battles with their publishers.

Pressmen operate the rotary presses that turn out the daily paper. Their duties include mounting the page plates, which once were made of heavy metal but now are lightweight plastic or paper, and mounting the huge rolls of newsprint on the presses. Once the presses are running, the pressmen have little to do except repair breaks in the webs of paper.

In the nation's press rooms, the union generally had estab-

lished rigid manning formulae, which in the early 70's publishers regarded as grossly expensive and restrictive. Manning was usually on a unit basis, meaning that the size of a given shift's crew depended on such variables as number of pages in the day's paper, total number of papers to be run and the number of different colors of ink to be used. In many cases the manning was more than actually required to do the job. For example, in the Washington Post strike of 1975, a pickup crew of 35 supervisory and clerical employees who had received a crash course in press operations at a "scab school" given by the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association in Oklahoma City was able to produce a daily paper with a staff one-fifth that required by the Pressmen's Union manning requirements.

Such rigid manning provisions in most union press rooms were coupled with dramatic overtime costs. Press room work could be given only to journeymen whom the local allowed to work in its jurisdiction. In Washington, the Post management charged that the local kept the number of journeymen at an artificially low level so that its members could pick up heavy overtime, often two or three, sometimes even five or six, overtime shifts a week at premium pay. Prior to being knocked out of the box in their losing strike in Washington, the pressmen had lost a manning strike in Dallas and another strike over a discharge in Kansas City. In the latter case there is a strong suspicion by unionists that the company provoked the strike with the idea if the strike failed the company would be free of manning requirements. Whatever the company's motives, that was the result. The union

never returned and the presses at the Kansas City Star are run by half the number mandated by the union's old manning agreement.

The Post strike was the climactic evidence that the bargaining power once wielded by highly skilled unions had vanished. With printers' work reduced to a level that could be bought off the street at minimum wage levels and with printers often looking no further than preserving lifetime job guarantees, the Post and other papers had successfully turned to their press rooms. The Post experience, following on those in Dallas and Kansas City, proved that a newspaper could publish with a ragtag crew of printers and a scab team of pressmen trained in Oklahoma City. The printers had lost the clout of their once-skilled craft and the pressmen were expendable.

The possibility that the nation's organized pressmen may now be "housebroken" is given credibility by developments in 1978 in Sacramento, California. There, Mailers at The Sacramento Bee went on strike in April, 1978, in part over their own manning dispute. Days before the strike, which leaders of other unions regarded as inevitable, Bee pressmen agreed on a new contract. The new contract would mean that over its term pressmen would surrender unit manning for foreman manning, in which management would decide daily manning. In exchange, about 55 of the Bee's 65 pressmen got job guarantees. The price, however, was to help doom the Mailers' strike, which continues three years later. Then the Pressmen agreed not to honor any picket line, including the one certain to be thrown up by the mailers within days. That agreement was entered into on explicit orders from an interna-

tional vice president.

MAILERS

With the threat of effective strikes in newspaper composing and press rooms either diminished or eliminated altogether, the last major areas where a union might be able to shut down a publisher are in the production areas that follow the pressroom operation, namely the mailroom and the delivery system.

The first, the mail room, is where sections of the newspaper are inserted or "stuffed" into the finished daily news product spewing out of the press room on conveyers. Mailers put the various sections of the paper, some of them pre-printed earlier, into the daily news sections, count the papers, tie them into bundles for individual carrier routes and move the bundles to the loading platform for truck distribution to carriers and news racks.

Organized mail room employees belong to the Mailers branch of the printer-dominated ITU. High speed inserting machines have already replaced much of the manual work done by mailers. Manning of these high speed inserter machines has already begun to become a critical mailer issue and is twinned with jurisdiction over inserting pre-print sections as the battle line is drawn for the next power showdown in the industry. When new pre-print inserting machines are perfected--or as publishers try to move pre-print inserting to subcontractors--mailers will face the

same kind of last-ditch fight already encountered by printers and pressmen.

A possible preview of manning troubles that will increase for the mailers came in the 1978 Sacramento Bee strike, a strike with parallels to the press strike at the Washington Post. Bee mailers, like Post pressmen, lost Guild support. Bee mailers, like Post pressmen, were fighting to maintain unit manning. Post pressmen lost their bargaining rights. The Bee strike goes on three years later but the mailers apparently are prepared to abandon it if their printer brothers are allowed to return to work. Events at both the Bee and the Post proved that supervisors, clerks and other strikebreakers could perform mail room work.

DELIVERERS

The final major work area in which unions might hold some effective strike power is in the delivery of papers. Here, no one single union seems to have established a national pattern of representation. At some newspapers, the Guild controls deliveries; at some, the Teamsters are involved; at others, most notably New York, delivery jurisdiction is claimed by non-affiliated independent unions. And finally, some newspapers use independent contractors, rather than employees, to make deliveries. This was the case at the Washington Post, a decisive advantage to the company in winning the 1975 pressmen's strike.

On the other hand the Deliverers Union in New York was the key to whatever success other unions enjoyed in the 1978 New York Post strike. When the drivers worked for the first few days of the strike, publication and distribution continued; when the deliverers later refused to cross the picket line, publication shut down.

But union control of a paper's trucks is not necessarily pivotal. At The Sacramento Bee, the striking mailers also had jurisdiction over metropolitan deliveries. On the first day of the strike, mailer-drivers abandoned their trucks full of the day's paper all over the city. But Bee management lost only that one day of deliveries as it quickly put non-union employees behind the wheel. In 1974, management of the Stockton Record employed a strike plan designed both to intimidate unions contemplating a strike and to get deliveries made if a strike actually did materialize. The company recruited members of the University of the Pacific football team, placed them in company cars and for several weeks paid them to follow delivery vans driven by Guild members on their daily routes. Presumably the "shadow" drivers would have been able to take over deliveries on a moment's notice. In any event, there was no strike.

CONCLUSION

It may seem from this recital of declining economic power among newspaper unions, that the future for The Newspaper Guild is bleak. But it need not be. There are several courses the Guild can pursue.

The first is merger. As the number of newspaper unions and their power are decimated by technology it seems imperative that the surviving unions move toward merger. The advantages of one union, one bargaining policy and one set of elected leaders over a hodge podge of rivalries, disputes and misunderstandings are so obvious as to need no elaboration. The problem is that merger is not easy. There are bitter memories (who crossed whose picket line where, who settled first to leave who on a limb) and there inevitably will be disputes over which policies and traditions will carry over into "one big union." And not the least, unless newspaper union leaders are endowed with an uncommon selflessness there will be political battles over which set of officers will preside over a new union. Just days before this report was finished, merger talks between the Guild and the ITU, so hopefully started less than five years ago, were officially broken off. The reasons are not clear to the writer but they might well include all of the roadblocks just listed.

But even if merger is off, at least for the present, there still are strategies that can allow the Guild and other newspaper unions to regain some of the bargaining power lost to technology

in the 1970's.

For one thing, the Guild and the ITU are pledged to continue to honor a "no-raiding" pact as far as organizing in each other's traditional jurisdiction without the other's consent. A hotline between Washington and Colorado Springs to try to coordinate bargaining and strike strategies will remain open.

And at the local level there is much that can be done. In several areas, most notably California, Washington state and Hawaii, the Guild, ITU and other craft unions have for several years successfully pursued coordinated bargaining. Put simply, coordinated bargaining means that after the various unions bargain their separate non-economic issues, they come together jointly to seek agreed-upon common economic goals. The success of West Coast coordination compares so dramatically to the divisive unplanned shotgun approaches of New York City as to make the need for coordination easily as clear as the need for eventual merger.

Finally, the Guild itself must make itself more responsive to its members so that they in turn will be more responsive to their own needs. There might be more emphasis on education (perhaps tuition payments for members taking community college labor studies), more emphasis on political involvement (a challenging task considering reporters' reluctance to taint their professional objectivity with partisanship), and the providing of additional membership benefits (Central California Newspaper Guild, for example, is exploring food and gasoline cooperatives). And not of the least importance, the Guild should reassess much

of American labor's knee-jerk rejection of quality of work life experiments and instead join with the Auto Workers and Communication Workers in a serious examination of new means to improve member involvement and satisfaction in the work place. We can be conquered by the VDTs of the 1980's or we can conquer them. We can be frustrated by publishers' decisions involving the presentation of news or we can help make those decisions. We've tried the former, the latter can't be any worse.

P.S. This paper was reproduced on a VDT-type word processor.