

Negotiating Technological Change: How Media Unions Navigate Artificial Intelligence in Journalism

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In summer 2023, Hollywood writers and actors attracted international news coverage during a strike over entertainment media’s use of artificial intelligence (AI). One of the striking unions, the Writers Guild of America (WGA), struck for 148 days to secure a Minimum Basic Agreement that provides worker protections for the use of AI in the film, television, and streaming media industries. Yet, the future of media labor and union collective action over the use of AI extends beyond Hollywood. Between April 2015 and June 2021, more than 7,500 journalism workers unionized in the United States at over 200 internet-only, publishing, and broadcast media companies (see my 2023 article in *Media, Culture & Society* “Happiness in Newsroom Contracts: Communicative Resistance for Digital Work and Life Satisfaction”).

Since 2023, journalism workers have continued to unionize partially due to the use of AI and other new technologies in newsrooms. In May 2023, for example, workers at CNET, an online news and technology site, announced that they joined the WGA East (WGAE) partly because a “union would give us a voice on new AI and marketing initiatives,” according to their “Why We’re Organizing” statement. Similarly, workers at IGN, an online video game and entertainment journalism site, announced their unionization with The News Guild (TNG) in February 2024, writing in their Mission Statement that they need “protections against generative AI and similar technologies.” The integration of AI into media workplaces has the potential to dramatically reshape working conditions, editorial processes, and power dynamics in journalism. Union responses to these changes will play a vital role in determining how journalism workers navigate new technologies and labor practices, impacting the future of journalism and industry dynamics.

This commentary explores how media unions have navigated the use of AI in journalism, going beyond their initial reasons for organizing and first collective bargaining agreement (CBA) priorities. Unions’ responses to technological changes have a long history. Already in 1966, TNG members at Canada’s *Oshawa Times* went on strike and won meaningful union and job security protection over the introduction of automation, as I note in a 2018 *Journalism Studies* article, “Temporary Labor Convergence: Newswriters Mobilize Massive Community Support to Organize the Newspaper Chain, 1963–1966.” Karin Assmann’s monograph assesses the effect of unionization and guild membership on digital news work, working conditions, and culture, going beyond why they organized and their initial CBA priorities. Assmann

recognizes that one limitation of her study and an issue for future research turns on the use of AI in journalism. Attempting to contribute to labor process theory scholarship, Assmann importantly acknowledges the historical-institutional relational approach developed in Timothy Marjoribanks' 2000 book *News Corporation, Technology and the Workplace: Global Strategies, Local Change*. However, this approach downplays unions' repertoire of communication practices that illuminate how they continuously navigate technological changes (see my 2024 article in *Journalism* "Managing and Resisting Workplace Reorganization: Labor-Management Relations in a Pre-digital Media Corporation"). By considering unions' alternative communication practices surrounding AI, we can better understand how unions actively and continuously resist and negotiate technological changes and their implications for the future of work, labor rights, and innovation in journalism workplaces.

Here, I examine how unions use alternative communication practices to navigate the integration of AI into journalism and their impact on labor in the United States. Extending a relational approach to labor process theory, I analyze five key actions that unions have taken in the past year: conducting AI collective bargaining surveys, launching strike action and alternative strike publications, negotiating new technology clauses in CBAs, starting petitions, and organizing Days of Action on social media platforms. Such actions demonstrate how unions navigate the use of AI in journalism, and illuminate the effect of unionization on journalism work, working conditions, and cultural dynamics.

Unions have historically used bargaining surveys to assess members' perceptions of workplace issues and their confidence in union and management responses to those issues. TNG undertook a survey to which 827 members responded. TNG's November 2023 report revealed significant concerns regarding AI's integration into journalism workplaces. In the report's introduction, TNG President Jon Schleuss was clear: "Management's bots can't replace us." A majority of survey respondents (54%) expressed distrust in their employers' ability to "use AI responsibly or ethically"; 90% said that unions have a strong responsibility to "enforce responsible and ethical use of AI in the workplace." Their key concerns included protections against job loss and transparency around AI's use and implementation. Most respondents also wanted employers to adopt a "strong code of ethics" and offer "employee training and education." Additionally, several respondents emphasized the importance of collective action, referring to the 2023 Hollywood strike as an example. Recalling labor process theory, the survey highlights the historical role of union actions in addressing worker concerns and in shaping their responses to AI's integration into journalism workplaces.

In response to management's failure to address workers' concerns, including job security amid the integration of AI, journalism workers have taken strike action. The TNG-represented union at Insider, a digital news outlet dedicated to business and tech news, embarked on a 13-day strike in June 2023, underscoring how unionization can impact members' working conditions and cultural dynamics. The strike was prompted by management's failure to resolve an unfair labor practice over workers' health care coverage and disagreements over several contract issues, notably regarding the use of AI and other new technologies in the newsroom. During the strike, Insider Union

launched its online strike-born publication *Business Outsider*, which published 20 articles, many of them commentaries focused on the strike. Two articles criticized AI's potential to replace human journalists and highlighted unions' role in negotiating workplace changes. For instance, Rosemary Donahue emphasized in her June 7 article, "Insider management has hinted at using AI in our newsroom, but AI can never replace the work of real humans" because humans have "accuracy and empathy." Understanding that these technological changes are inevitable, Adam Rogers affirmed in his June 12 article that "it makes sense to incorporate rules and guidelines for what role [AI will] play in journalistic policies and, yes, contracts with journalism unions." Meanwhile, this strike-born publication exemplifies a genre of alternative journalism; as my *Journalism* article shows, unions have launched strike publications since the 19th century to extend their picket lines, communicate grievances, and pressure management for workplace changes.

Press releases issued by unions after they secure contracts offer additional insights into members' views on the impact of unionization. For instance, Indianapolis NewsGuild (ING) members, who have been represented by TNG for decades, ratified a new CBA in January 2024 that includes important job security provisions: "No employee covered by this contract will lose employment with the Employer solely as a result of the introduction of new equipment." In a press release, the ING emphasized, "We fought off a proposal that would have made it easier for Gannett to implement artificial intelligence." This case highlights the union's commitment to protecting journalism workers' interests amid technological changes.

Other unions' CBAs have directly confronted the issue of AI integration into the workplace. For example, when members of FT Specialist (like the *Financial Times* itself, a division of FT Group) publicly announced their WGAE union organizing campaign in January 2021, their priorities initially did not involve AI. However, their priorities quickly changed. Their CBA ratified in August 2023 included an AI-related clause: "the Company shall discuss in advance the introduction of any new technology" and "the Guild shall have the right to bargain expeditiously over the effects of the changes." In an August 23 press release, the FT Specialist bargaining committee highlighted satisfaction with the agreement: "We are so happy to say that we have ratified our first contract, which . . . set parameters for the implementation of new technology, including AI . . ." Similarly, AI was not a key reason why TNG-affiliated PEN Guild members announced their union organizing effort in October 2021 at Politico and E&E News (owned by Politico, it focuses on energy and environmental policy). However, upon reaching a tentative agreement in January 2024 over its first CBA, PEN Guild included innovative language regarding the use of AI. In a 1-page explainer, PEN Guild noted, "Employees will not be replaced by AI for the first 15 months of the contract. After that, employees would receive an additional 10 weeks of severance." These contract protections suggest that the use of AI has raised workers' consciousness around the introduction of new technologies, echoing historical union actions aimed at regulating automation in newsrooms.

Petitions are another vital tool for journalism workers to advocate for their collective interests, demonstrating their confidence in unions' role in shaping their labor,

particularly regarding AI protections. For example, the WGAE published an online petition on October 30, 2023, with over 1,000 member signees from various media industries demanding AI protections for journalists. The petition was signed by WGAE members at online-first and legacy media companies, including ABC News, CBS News, CNET, Hearst, HuffPost, MSNBC, Slate, The Ringer, VICE, and Vox Media. The petition called on employers to “[w]ork collaboratively with us . . . before implementing AI tools,” ensuring that they are adopted in “ethical and equitable ways.” Additionally, it demanded a public commitment “to never replacing a human worker with an AI tool.” The petition urged employers to engage in “good faith negotiations on AI” outside planned contract negotiations, with a guarantee that future bargaining sessions will consider AI protections. This petition underscores the importance of another union communication practice: action aimed at employers to critically demystify the transforming labor process in journalism and to express workers’ collective organizing demands in their labor-management reform struggles.

Journalism workers have also leveraged social media platforms to raise awareness about AI’s impacts on labor. For instance, TNG-affiliated PEN Guild members initiated a social media campaign called “Journalists, Not Robots” in October 2023, using the hashtag #Irreplaceable. This campaign shared individual worker narratives and key accomplishments of the humans who make journalism, such as editor Rishika Dugyala, who helped launch a newsletter on race and politics. Similarly, the WGAE created the hashtags #AINeedsHumans and #JournalismNeedsHumans Day of Action on social media platforms on October 30, 2023. The union encouraged members and allies to participate by posting about this AI Day of Action to emphasize the importance of protecting workers. The WGAE offered sample messages, such as “Employers need to recognize that #JournalismNeedsHumans! I’m joining the @WGAEast in calling on employers to collaborate with workers before using AI tools in our workplaces to ensure they’re applied in ethical & equitable ways. #AINeedsHumans <https://wgaea.st/AINEedsHumans>.” Like petitions, unions’ social media activism can demystify the labor process in journalism, clarifying the roles of human labor and AI.

The repertoire of union communication practices discussed here echoes some of the key concepts outlined in Marjoribanks’ historical-institutional relational approach to labor process theory. These union practices highlight critical issues impacting the labor process when integrating new technologies into media workplaces. These issues include job displacement and the need for worker training and upskilling due to automation. However, despite union efforts, media management in some union-represented workplaces, including Gannett’s New Jersey news outlets, Dow Jones, and AP News, have resisted union demands regarding the use of AI, according to Angela Fu’s September 18, 2023, article in Poynter “As AI Enters Newsrooms, Unions Push for Worker Protections.” Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that management in union-represented workplaces do not always unilaterally control the introduction of computerized technologies like AI into the labor process; negotiations are ongoing. For example, on December 24, 2023, AP News Guild announced a contract agreement with management, attributing its success partially to “strong member pressure through social media [and] petitions”; the deal

includes protections against the “riskier” aspects of AI. Examining unions’ diverse communication practices, as my work has outlined, offers useful insights into the multifaceted collective actions that unions take to negotiate, shape, and reshape their work, working conditions, and culture dynamics in journalism.

More research, as Assmann suggests, is needed to extend labor process theory beyond newswriters’ initial organizing motives and priorities and to further clarify the effect of unionization on workers’ perceptions of AI. In-depth interviews and surveys could uncover the varied ways that union membership shapes journalism workers’ experiences and attitudes toward the use of AI, its impact on job security, and workplace dynamics in journalism. Researchers could also further explore specific actions taken by unions, as outlined here, to address the challenges associated with AI in journalism workplaces. By analyzing union actions, such as collective bargaining negotiations, strikes, and online campaigns, researchers could gain valuable insights into the impacts and effectiveness of different union communication practices in shaping AI policies and use in individual workplaces. Finally, researchers could examine union interventions in national and state-level government policy debates surrounding AI to better understand the wider political implications of unionization in journalism. For instance, studying TNG’s and the WGAE’s testimonies submitted to government forums and legislative hearings on AI policy could reveal how unions advocate for journalism workers’ collective interests and influence policy decisions regarding the use of AI. Taking a historical-institutional relational approach reminds us that stakeholders struggle over such policy processes and decision-making, which enable or constrain technological innovation and workplace changes.

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