

Workers of the Newsrooms Unite

AN ANALYSIS OF UNION ORGANIZING IN U.S. LOCAL NEWS
MEDIA, 2017 TO PRESENT

JESSICA MAHONE, PH.D.



HUSSMAN SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MEDIA

Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media

Workers of the Newsrooms Unite:
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Jessica Mahone, Ph.D.

Research Director, Center for Innovation and Sustainability in Local Media
UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media

Since 2015, workers in a growing number of media organizations have unionized (Fu, 2021; Greenhouse, 2019). Initially, those unionizing were primarily workers in digital media, but workers at more traditional— and smaller— media organizations soon followed, unionizing in response to consolidation, layoffs, stagnant pay, and declining benefits (Greenhouse, 2019; 2022).

Existing research and writing into this trend has focused on the general momentum behind unionization in media companies with some analysis of the outcomes for some specific unions. Fu (2021) examined unionization in media organizations between 2012 and 2021 and found that there has been a steady increase in the number of media organizations not just unionizing but successfully gaining representation. Additionally, unions at media organizations are bucking a 40-year decline of unions in the U.S. (Fu, 2021; Greenhouse, 2019).

This unionization momentum has happened against the backdrop in the decline of local news, increasing consolidation of local news media, and acquisition of local newspapers by investment firms. Between 2004 and 2019, the U.S lost 2,100 newspapers, and although digital and TV newsrooms saw slight increases in employment, total newsroom employment declined 50% (Abernathy, 2020). Additionally, in the past two and a half years, three mergers and acquisitions have placed approximately 850 local newspapers in the hands of investment companies (See Abernathy, 2020, p. 36).

In late 2019, Gatehouse merged with Gannett (O’Connell, 2019). In late 2020, Chatham Asset Management acquired McClatchy (McClatchy, 2020), and in mid-2021, Alden Global Capital acquired Tribune Publishing (Folkenflik, 2021). Such acquisitions come with “a new management philosophy focused on bottom-line performance to the exclusion of journalism’s civic mission” (Abernathy, 2020, p. 32) and measures to cut costs that often include layoffs (Coppins, 2021).

Most existing analysis of and reporting about unionization in media companies has not specifically addressed unionization in local newsrooms, and while some have suggested ownership changes and the growing consolidation of local news media as factors in workers’ decisions to unionize, there is limited research about the role acquisitions and consolidation play in newsroom unionization. However, Proffitt’s (2019) case study of union organizers at the *Lakeland Ledger* and the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, which formed a union in 2016, indicates that concerns over consolidation is a motivating factor for newsrooms to unionize.

The following report examines data on unionization in media organizations over the past five years, specifically examining factors that drive unions in local newsrooms between 2017

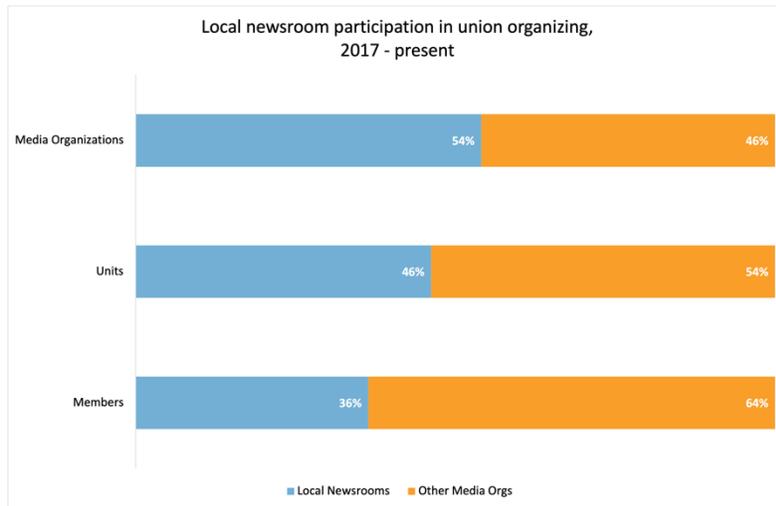
and early 2022. “Local” is defined here as providing content meeting a critical information need to a specific community, city, county, or state (Napoli, et al., 2018). This report explores the unionization of local newsrooms in relation to broader trends in media unionization, the success of union drives in local newsrooms, the role of ownership in unionization in local newsrooms and if local newsroom unions are forming in right-to-work or union-friendly states.

Some highlights from this report:

- Local newsrooms make up about half of the media organizations where workers have unionized in the past five years.
- Fully 90% of unions organized by workers in local newsrooms have gained representation.
- Approximately a third of local newsrooms unions that have gained representation over the past five years have been voluntarily recognized by management, two thirds have gained representation through an election.
- More than 40% of newsrooms where workers organized a union changed hands in the year before or the year after unionizing.
- Local newsroom unions in right-to-work states have been more successful in gaining representation than local newsroom unions in union-friendly states.
- Local newsroom workers in 28 states and the District of Columbia have organized unions, mapped below

Local Newsrooms Organizing Amidst a Wave of Unionization in Media Organizations

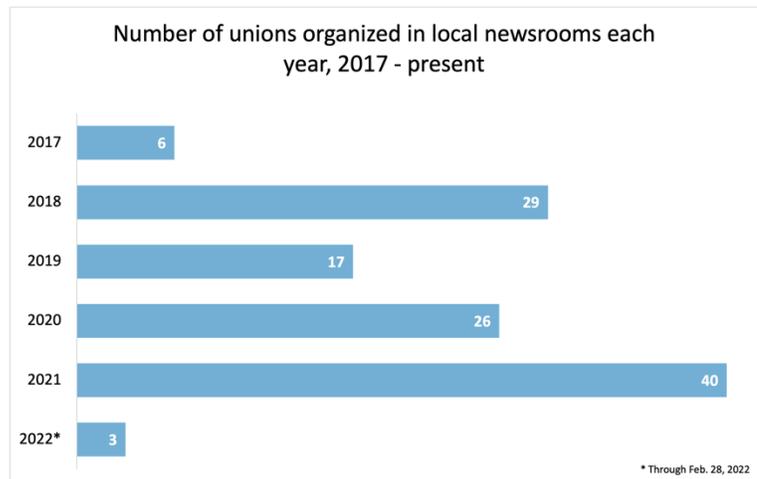
We identified 162 individual unions formed by more than 9,500 workers in 224 media organizations in the United States between 2017 and 2022. Of the media organizations where workers have organized unions over the past five years, more than half, 54%, have been local newsrooms¹ or a coalition of local newsrooms that formed one union. Of the individual media unions formed, just under half, 46%, represented local newsrooms. The APP-MPJ, a union of workers from three New Jersey newspapers, is an example of a coalition union.



Unions in local newsrooms tend to be smaller than unions of other media organizations, with an average of 49 members compared to an average of 89 members in non-local media unions.² In addition, 35% of media union members between 2017 and 2022 are in local newsrooms.³

Local Newsroom Unions

The remainder of our analyses focus specifically on unions formed in local newsrooms. As has been previously documented (Fu, 2021), union formation at media organizations has increased considerably in the past five years, and this is true for local newsrooms as well. In 2017, only six local newsrooms were part of an effort to unionize. Almost five times as many newsrooms, 29, took part in unionization efforts in 2018. Although 2019 and 2020 saw fewer local newsrooms engaged in labor organization, 2021 saw 40 local newsrooms form unions, a full third of newsrooms where unions were organized over the past five years. Through the first two months



¹ There are duplicates where workers have organized more than once; these are analyzed separately because the efforts were separate. These duplicates are part of New York Public Radio (NYPR). In addition, one of those, Gothamist, appears three times because they initially unionized in 2017 and then twice as part of NYPR.

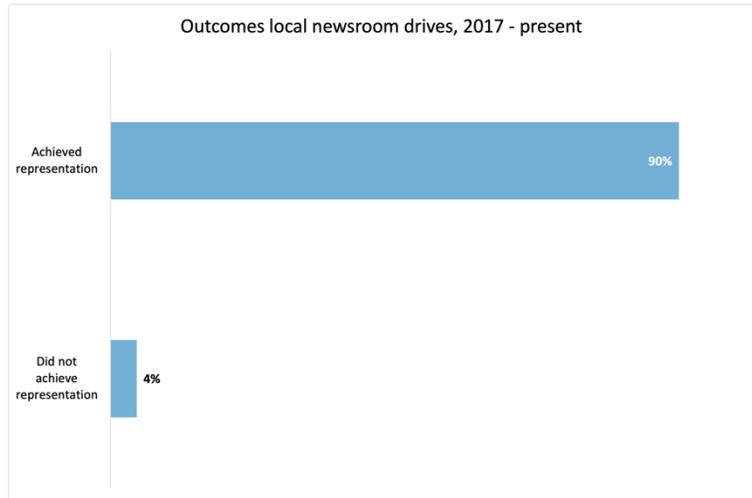
² Statistically significant at $p < .05$ level; $t = 2.4433$, $p < .05$.

³ Statistically significant at $p < .05$ level; $X^2 = 894.57$, $p < .00001$.

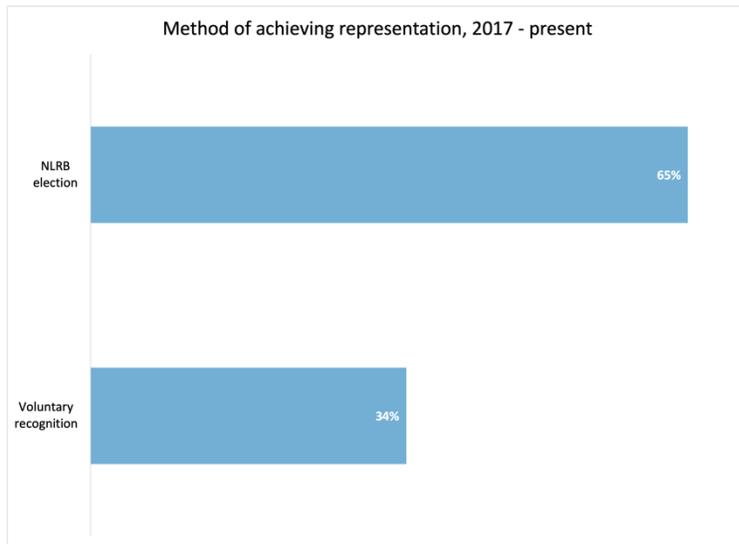
of 2022, three local news organizations were part of unionization efforts.

Outcomes of Unionization Efforts

We then examined the outcomes of unionization efforts by examining whether or not these unions had their representations certified. Unions can achieve certification of representation in one of two ways: voluntary recognition by management or by winning a representation election conducted by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) (National Labor Relations Board, n.d.). Fully 90% of the unions that have been organized in local newsrooms have achieved representation⁴.



Of the 108 local newsrooms that achieved representation, 65% did so through an NLRB-conducted election while 34% were voluntarily recognized by management.⁵

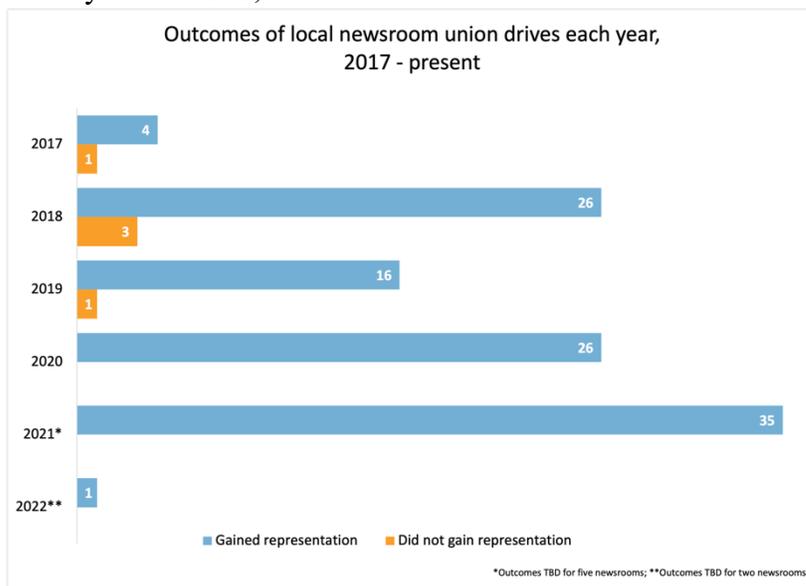


⁴ Statistically significant at $p < .05$ level; $X^2 = 73.025$, $p < .00001$.

⁵ Statistically significant at $p < .05$ level; $X^2 = 8.981$, $p < .01$.

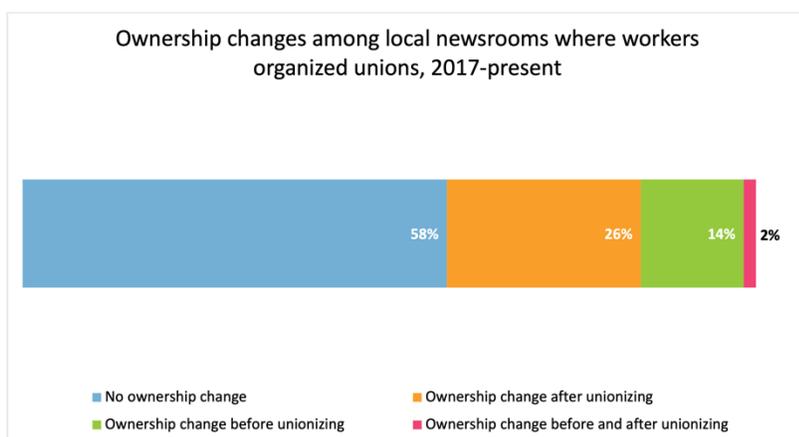
Outcomes by Year

Overall, unions in local newsrooms have been more successful than not in gaining representation with increased success each year. In 2017, four of the six local newsrooms⁶ that participated in unionization efforts were successful, followed by 26 of 29 in 2018, 16 of 17 in 2019, and all 26 in 2020. In 2021, 35 of the 40 local newsrooms that unionized were successful. The outcomes of those efforts are not yet determined for the remaining five local newsrooms that unionized that year, and currently, two of the three local newsrooms that have sought to form unions in 2022 have yet to see any outcome to their efforts as well.⁷



Local News Unions and Ownership

Some have suggested that volatility around ownership, such as an ownership change or potential takeover bid, may influence the decision of newsroom workers to unionize (Greenhouse, 2022; Proffitt, 2019), so we examined the ownership patterns of these in the year before, the year of and in the current year.



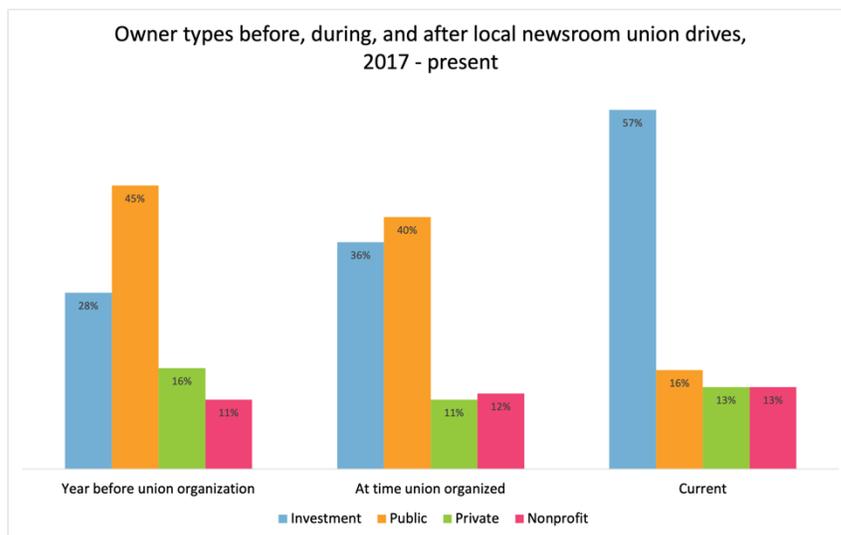
Of newsrooms where workers organized a union, 14% changed hands in the year before unionizing while another 26% changed owners after unionizing; another two percent of newsrooms changed hands both before and after they unionized. In other words, 42% of newsrooms where a union was organized saw an

⁶ Data for 2017 was incomplete, with no outcome being recorded for one union.

⁷ Because these subgroups are small, we are reporting raw numbers. Data provided for descriptive purposes only.

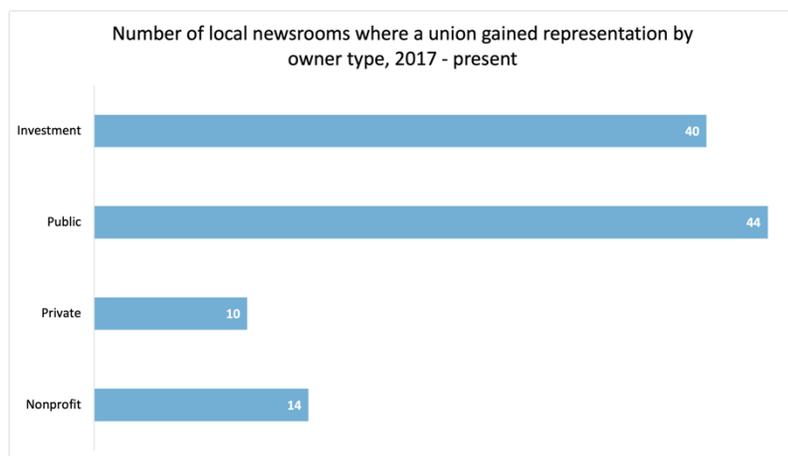
ownership change around the time of union organizing⁸.

We then examined the types of ownership changes that happened during this time period overall, starting by looking at the change in how many newsrooms where workers organized were owned by investment firms, public companies, private companies, and nonprofit organizations over the past five years. Over the past five years, the proportion of these newsrooms owned by investment companies doubled between the year before unionization and the current year.



We then further examined the specific ownership patterns of the newsrooms which changed hands over the past five years. Of those 51 newsrooms that saw an ownership change around the time of unionization, 39 were acquired by an investment firm. Seventeen of those newsrooms acquired by an investment firm were acquired by Alden Global Capital while 14 were acquired by Chatham Asset Management. Another eight were acquired by Gatehouse through its merger with Gannett. One was acquired by Apollo Global Management⁹.

Outcomes and Ownership



We also looked at a newsroom's type of owner at the time of unionization and their success at gaining representation. Of the 44 newsrooms owned by an investment firm when they unionized, 40 were successful in gaining representation. Similarly, 44 of 48 newsrooms owned by a publicly traded company when they unionized successfully gained representation while 10 of 14

⁸ A test of proportions found the difference between the proportion of newsrooms with an ownership change and newsrooms without statistically insignificant at the $p < .05$ level.

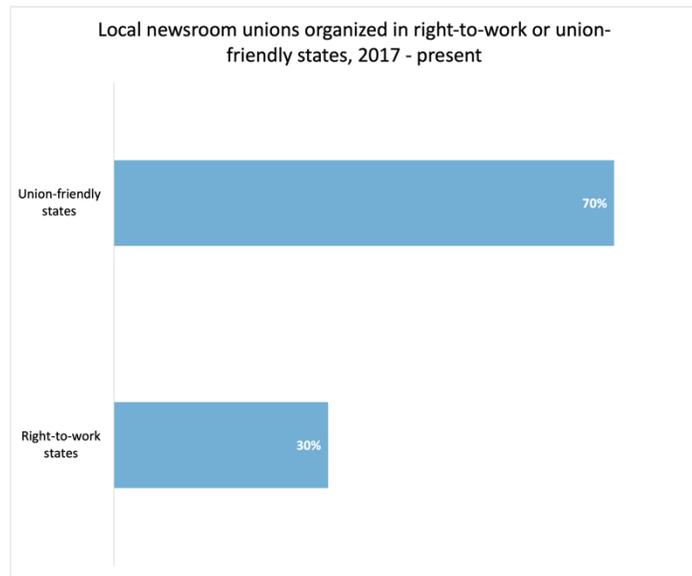
⁹ Because these subgroups are small, we are reporting raw numbers. Data provided for descriptive purposes only.

newsrooms owned by private companies and 14 of 15 nonprofit newsrooms were successful in their bids to gain representation¹⁰.

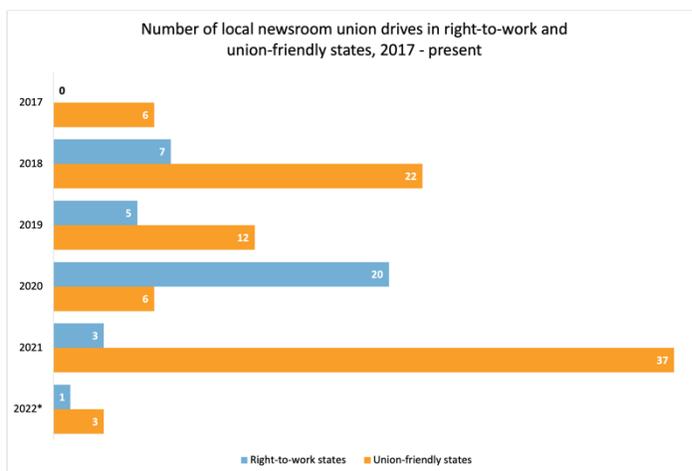
Where Local News Unions Are Being Formed

Twenty-seven states have laws to bar unions and employers from requiring union membership or dues as a condition of employment. These laws, and the states that have passed them, are commonly called “right to work.” Right-to-work laws are typically viewed as weakening unions (Cohn, 2015; Vassello, 2022). In such states, workers can still organize a union, and all workers are still protected by the agreements negotiated by the union regardless of whether or not they are a member (NLRB, n.d.; Vassello, 2022), but unions have to collect dues from members rather than deduct it from paychecks (Vassello, 2022).

We wanted to know if local newsrooms are more likely to unionize in a state without right-to-work laws than states with such laws. We found that seventy percent of the local newsrooms that have unionized in the past five years have been in states without right-to-work laws with only 30% being in states with right-to-work laws.¹¹



Local Newsroom Unions and Right-to-Work States Over Time



Looking across each year, in general, local newsrooms unionized mostly in union-friendly states except for 2020. In 2020, 20 of the 26 local newsrooms which unionized were in a right-to-work state.

¹⁰ Because these subgroups are small, we are reporting raw numbers. Data provided for descriptive purposes only.

¹¹ Statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level; $X^2 = 19.041$, $p < .00001$.

Conclusion

This report examined the landscape of unionization by local newsroom workers over the past five years, offering some initial insight about their place within the broader movement of union organization in media. This report indicates that workers in local newsrooms represent a significant and growing part of the media union landscape even as—and perhaps because—local news media are in decline.

Local newsroom workers have been overwhelmingly successful in achieving representation through their unions. However, this research does not address the effects union representation has had on workers. Future research should explore how successful these unions have been at negotiating contracts with management and if benefits, pay and workloads have improved for newsroom workers. Additionally, given the majority of local newsroom unions have achieved recognition through elections rather than voluntary recognition, future research should address what factors lead management to voluntarily recognize unions and whether or not that influences contract negotiations.

Of the newsrooms where workers have organized unions, more than 40% have changed hands within the year before or after workers unionized. Additionally, most of the newsrooms that changed hands are now owned by investment firms. Given the increasing frequency of mergers and acquisitions in local news (Abernathy, 2020), this perhaps is not surprising. However, this indicates that the volatility around a potential acquisition is a likely factor in the decision of newsroom workers to unionize but is not necessarily the sole driving factor.

However, experiencing or anticipating an ownership change is likely only one of many factors influencing the decision of local newsroom workers to organize unions, and future research should address other factors such as layoffs, wage stagnation, benefit cuts and the consolidation of editorial functions in regional hubs relative to unionization as well as the extent to which unionization mitigates such actions after a merger or acquisition. One limitation of this report is that we did not examine ownership changes in comparison with local newsrooms where workers have not organized unions. Unfortunately, it was outside the scope of our data but is an area for future research to address.

One of the more surprising findings in this report is that unions in right-to-work states have been more successful than those in union-friendly states at gaining representation. In fact, all local newsroom unions in right-to-work states have successfully gained representation, which raises questions about the value of unionization in states where the law is hostile to unions. Future research should examine what factors have made this possible, and in addition to understanding voluntary recognition in general, future research should specifically address the significance of voluntary recognition in right-to-work states. Further, research in this area should explore the success of contract negotiation between local newsroom unions and management in right-to-work states in comparison with negotiation in union-friendly states.

Finally, future research should explore what unionization means for the communities these local newsrooms serve, particularly as investment firms play a growing role in the local news landscape. New research has found that the acquisition of newspapers by investment companies results in decreased localization of news content as well as a lower volume of content overall (LeBrun, Todd, and Piper, 2022). Future research should examine the effect of unionization on not only the consolidation of editorial and production processes but the effect of unionization on how much original and local news content newsrooms produce. In short, does unionization enable newsrooms to better serve their communities?

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Appendix: Data and Methods

Identifying Media Unions

The first step of this project was to identify unions organized by workers in local news organizations over the past five years. To do this, we started with a list of media union drives in the entire U.S. compiled by Angela Fu for Poynter. Fu's list included union votes from 2012 through June 2021. We filtered her list for votes from January 2017 through June 2021. Then, a student research assistant disaggregated cases involving more than one organization and identified organizations whose content provided reporting to a local or statewide audience using criteria from Napoli et al. (2018).

We supplemented this list with National Labor Relations Board case and elections data. We began with case data, downloading all representation cases between July 1, 2021, and March 14, 2022. Because representation cases include employer petitions to close a union as well as requests to change union representation, we filtered this data specifically for employee-initiated representation elections administered by the NLRB. Then, this list was manually filtered for cases involving media organizations, followed by the identification of which organizations provide reporting to local or statewide audiences. Then, data about the dates and results of each election were pulled from NLRB election results data. For cases where the election results are not yet final, the outcome and results were labeled "TBD." Only seven cases were undecided.

Finally, following Fu's (2021) approach, we identified voluntarily recognized unions using press releases from The NewsGuild, the Writers' Guild of America, East (WGAE), and the Screen Actors' Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA)¹³. The NewsGuild also provided data about their unions to CISLM this yielded one additional entry to our data from 2017.

We collected the name of the unit, the media or news organization, the name of the labor organization, the date, whether the union was voluntarily recognized, if the outcome for the union was successful or unsuccessful, if the media organization was local, and the owner of the media organization. Voluntarily recognized unions are not recorded in any central database (Fu, 2021), so we most likely have an undercount of these efforts in our data.

Ownership Data

We used several approaches to gathering ownership information for this project. First, we combined our data about unions with our existing data about newspaper ownership (UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, 2020). This data was used to identify the owner and type of owner as well as the owner and owner type at the time the union was formed.

We used the same three labels of ownership types as Abernathy (2020) for newspapers — private, investment, and public— and categorized owners based on their status in the year before a newsroom unionized, at the time the newsroom unionized, and their current ownership.

¹³ We also reviewed press releases from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), which often represents unions in broadcast stations, but we found no IBEW voluntarily recognized during this time period.

Private companies are not publicly traded and include large companies that own a portfolio of media across different media formats as well as smaller companies that own only newspapers. Public companies are those which are publicly traded. Investment companies were identified based on whether or not the company met five or more of the following criteria (Abernathy, 2020):

- Stated interest of parent company is maximizing shareholder return
- Many properties acquired as a group from other media companies through purchase of entire companies or divisions
- Majority financial and/or operational control is held by a small number of institutional stakeholders, such as lenders, private equity firms, or investment fund managers
- The company was formed or incorporated within the past 20 years and is a relative newcomer to newspaper ownership
- Newspaper holdings are part of portfolio of non-newspaper companies
- Movement of individual newspapers within portfolios
- Two or more financial restructurings including bankruptcy reorganization, rebranding after selling the company, or flips between public and private ownership
- Private equity company, hedge fund, or pension fund has at some point during the past decade owned all or a significant portion of the enterprise

Because there are non-profit and public media in our data, we added one additional category, “nonprofit.” These news organizations have a nonprofit tax status, and we also included public media in the nonprofit ownership category to reduce the confusion of having a “public media” ownership type as well as a “public” company ownership type.

We identified the ownership of the 10 commercial broadcast stations in our data by first looking up the station online and finding its current owner on the station website. If this was not possible, we did a TV, AM, or FM query in the FCC’s databases. To find previous owners, we did an internet search for the station name, “owner,” and the relevant year to identify press releases and news articles about mergers and acquisitions involving the station. In most cases, the station had published an article announcing a new owner.

Right to Work Data

Finally, using location data for each newsroom, we identified which newsrooms were in one of the 27 “right to work” states in the U.S. using a list from the National Right to Work Committee (n.d.).

Statistical Analysis

This study is primarily descriptive and relies primarily on the comparison of proportions and means. Data for this study were analyzed using the tidyverse set of packages and base R for statistical tests in RStudio. Unless otherwise noted, Chi-square tests for proportions and a t-tests for means were conducted, and significant results are indicated.

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