

Martin, Christopher R. (2019) *No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class*, Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY.

Review by Timothy Francisco

The old journalism adage, ‘Follow the Money,’ is the organizing principle for Christopher R. Martin’s study of the decades-long media abandonment of working-class readers in favor of upscale consumers, as the book deftly maps not only the effects of this shift on the shaping of perceptions of labor and class, but on the fracturing of the American public along lines of class, race, and political affiliation.

The first half of Martin’s book chronicles primarily print journalism’s movement toward a business model that increasingly targeted wealthier demographics for greater advertiser returns. Drawing from marketing materials aimed at media advertisers, Martin provides the reader convincing evidence of the industry’s amplified emphasis on its role as a revenue generator for business. From, as early as the 1950s, but most plainly from the late 1960s onward, these marketing materials appealed to corporate clients envisioning a consumerist class to be coveted and courted for its disposable income. As newspapers no longer strived to appeal to mass audiences, content increasingly came to reflect the interests, tastes, desires and aspirations of an upscale readership, not only leaving behind working-class readers, but ultimately framing the perception of the working class in national consciousness. Tracing coverage of worker strikes during this shift, Martin shows how striking workers became increasingly framed as burdens to upwardly mobile consumers.

For example, in studying coverage of transit strikes beginning with a 1952 bus strike in Cleveland, Martin notes a startling difference from the coverage to which we’ve grown accustomed (at least until very recently) in that the news story focuses on the details of the grievances of the striking workers, and the union’s role in trying to address these grievances— rather than the strike’s inconvenience for consumers. It’s an important difference and Martin makes good uses of it as a through line for his subsequent chapters that show the ways in which the aforementioned shift away from a mass and working-class readership toward an upscale clientele not only contributes to the fracturing of the public but also to a view of workers as objects rather than subjects. Martin’s argument is convincing and his analysis of both advertiser pitch packets and news ‘frames’ compelling.

Progressing through this analysis of the abandonment of the working class in news narratives, Martin reads the disappearance of the labor beat as an alignment of the content of the news with the preferences and habits of upscale readers and corporate and business interests. While others have documented the disappearance of the labor beat in mainstream media in favor of the business beat, Martin adds nuance to this argument by specifically examining the ubiquity of ‘workplace’

and ‘personal finance’ reporting which provides readers, or news ‘consumers,’ with narratives of individuals navigating the workplace (a reader-friendly substitution for corporation, according to Martin) to get ahead, rather than stories of classes of workers with shared economic futures. Similarly, personal finance reporting assumes as its centric norm individual responsibility in managing one’s current and future financial health, thereby privileging an investor/consumer class and downplaying if not ignoring pensions, social safety nets, and bargained benefits of a collective, unionized, working class.

Laying this important groundwork allows Martin to buttress the larger claims of the book, one of these being that the alignment of media with corporate interests contributed to the splintering of working-class politics. He finds that, at the same time mainstream media embraced an upscale demographic, conservatives worked to establish media channels to convey messaging aligned with conservative politics and economic policies, perhaps most visibly with Rupert Murdoch’s purchase of *The New York Post* in 1976 and Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) in 1977. As mainstream media followed the money away from the working class, populist and right-wing media began siphoning it away, not by actually championing its economic interests, but by pitting the working class against an out of touch elite on cultural issues, and fostering the narrative of abandonment that is a staple of the multiple conservative news outlets existing today.

The Trump presidency offers the most glaring example of this thesis, and Martin does attend to Trump throughout, but as importantly, he establishes a progressive conflation of the language of the ‘workplace’ with the language of political campaigns from the same time frame (1970s-present), drawing on Louis Althusser’s theories of interpellation and ‘hailing’ to chart how both the news and presidential campaigns create subject and object relationships. This is a fascinating portion of the book, as Martin argues that citizens become progressively ‘hailed’ as passive objects of the economy, rather than participating subjects. Central to this transformation is the transformation of the ‘corporation’ in news and political discourse into first the ‘workplace’ and then into ‘job creators’ while the same discourses separate workers from ‘labor’ or the working class, into ‘working families’ and ‘families,’ thereby perpetuating individualism over collectivism. Opposing ‘job creators’ are ‘job killers’: namely, environmental and workplace regulations, unions, and of course Democrats and Progressives.

In concluding, Martin suggests that media can better serve readers and our democracy by reconsidering the mass audience appeal. This, is, of course, a difficult proposition in an age of tribalism and ‘niche’ and custom markets, and Martin knows this, citing Michael Massing’s recommendation of establishing more beats covering more ‘communities’ under a broader vision of labor. And, while Martin does not attend to this in his fine book, I’d argue that we should also consider the demographics of the journalism profession. Media careers still very often require one or more low-paying or unpaid internships as a prerequisite for entry into the profession. This places a powerful class-based barrier in front of low-income, working-class, and non-traditional students who often lack the means—or the mobility—to work for low to no pay in major media markets. Further, as pay has continued to decline in the industry, and the work has become scarcer and more precarious, working-class students are often drawn to ‘safer’ career choices. As media remains predominately upper-middle class, and increasingly corporate and consolidated, unintended class blindness can proliferate as journalists themselves are very often steeped in the individualist corporate ethos. And, while the Trump ascendancy has sparked a ‘discovery’ of the working class

by mainstream media, one ironically sparked by a privileged millionaire, this working class is still too often framed as white, male, industrial, and passively victimized, when what is needed are more nuanced portrayals that image the diversity, complexities, expertise and agency of workers. Perhaps the ‘solutions journalism’ model offers one possibility in this respect.

In sum, Christopher Martin’s *No Longer Newsworthy* is a smart, much-needed discussion of parallel forces that have led to the difficult class politics of today. His combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses mesh together extremely well, and the book reveals the ways in which the business practices of mainstream media have historically been internalized in reportage and disseminated as ‘truths’ in the public sphere. Understanding this connection is invaluable in any attempt to reconstitute a working-class politics of equity and inclusion.

Reviewer Bio

Timothy Francisco is a former journalist, and Director of The Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State University. His latest work is a co-edited (with Sharon O’Dair) volume, *Shakespeare and the 99%: Literary Studies, The Profession, and The Production of Inequity* (Palgrave 2019).