

## Book Review

*Getting the message: communications workers and global value chains.* Work, Organisation, Labour and Globalisation, Volume 4 No 2. 2010

Edited by Catherine McKercher, Vincent Mosco & Ursula Huws. London: Analytica Publications and Monmouth: Merlin Press. (ISBN: 9780850366761, ISSN: 1745-641X)

Reviewer: ShehinaFazal

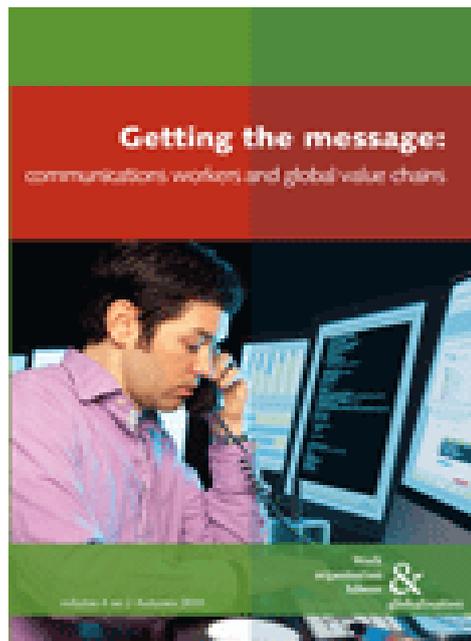
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This is a captivating monograph that focuses on the critical issues affecting the labour processes in the media, cultural and creative industries in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It consists of ten contributing articles that cover many geographical perspectives and positions concerning communications workers and the global value chains.

Setting the context for terms like ‘knowledge’, ‘communications’ and ‘cultural labour’, which have become common currency in the global creative industries marketplace, the first half of the monograph encompasses what the editors describe as the ‘message takers and message movers’, while the second half covers the ‘message makers-the professional or creative workers’. The introductory chapter by the editors conceptualises notions of communication workers and the global value chains, emphasizing the power of global communications corporations in reshaping the labour process in the communications industries. While traditional skills and crafts or ‘occupation based identities’ are diminishing, there are basic questions that have to be addressed on issues of ‘labour in the creative industries, knowledge work’ or ‘information labour’, in a climate of increasing importance of the global value chain.



An approach that views 'work along a spectrum' includes knowledge workers who are creative and 'symbolic analysts' and their product is not of producing goods but with the technologies linked to the productions and distribution of 'ideas or messages' Beneath the technologists are the creative class whose work consists of imaginative problem solving, enabled by drawing on complex bodies of knowledge. This creative class produces content. However, as the editors of the monograph point out, the bundling of technologists with the creative class highlight the difficulties of labelling these groups as knowledge workers 'between those who make messages and those whose labour enables messages to be created and shared'. (McKercher and Mosco, 2010, p.5)

The volume begins with the article by Napo and Schiller (2010) who writes about the US postal workers unions in the 1970s, that is, the message takers and the message collectors. Postal workers have traditionally received little attention from scholars, yet face similar struggles as the message makers-the creative class. Postal workers in the US have not been able to move beyond the narrow confines of 'craft identity'. Citing the labour convergence proposal in 1970s to form a single postal workers union that 'would have constituted a strong working class organisation, capable of wielding political as well as industrial pressure', the authors state that were several factors that hindered labour convergence, while industrial convergence went ahead with minimum obstruction. 'Separate histories and disparate motives' was one of the key issues in addition to financial factors as well as tensions that already existed, compounded by attitudes to and the relationship between gender, race and craft identity. Had the merger take place between the three unions, the convergence would have resulted in an organisation that would have been 'a powerful collective social actor'. Currently, the power of this organisation on the technological development frame, as well as telecommunications liberalisation arena remains unknown.

Roger Sealey in his article examines another player on the global stage, that is, the knowledge worker in the logistics businesses that are involved in the distribution rather than the production of good in the global economy. The logistics workers are in the business of moving goods faster and further at lower costs, thereby creating 'multi-modal workforce' that involves a wide range of transport workers. The logistics workers have not really been the beneficiaries of the expanding global economy and neither have they 'exercised this newly acquired power'. However, the logistics workers independence in their work patterns is increasingly eroded by ICT systems that monitor all of their work activities. Sealey states that this pattern illustrates the 'capitalist attempt to annex time and space respectively, a pattern that was set in train in the Fordist era'.

Stevens and Mosco focus on the collective power of trade unions in India, one of the global hubs of IT and IT-enabled services. Global media is giving increasing attention to India and its attendant transnational services sector. Stevens and Mosco provide case studies of three labour organisations that represent professional mobility: Union for ITES professionals (UNITES), the IT Professionals Forum (ITPF) and Young Professionals Collective (YPC). The stratification in these unions is characterised by software engineers at one end and the back-office as well as the call centre professionals at the other. Such a structure meant that a 'councilatory approach to addressing problems within the sector failed to mobilise IT professionals and gain meaningful company recognition'. This exposes some of the major cracks in IT labour organisations, nevertheless, with increasing private sector of both Indian and foreign MNCs that are based in India, there are moves towards self-sufficiency and gaining company recognition in the fast-paced liberalisation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in India.

While there is optimism in the restructuring of labour organisations in India, the question 'Will Chinese ICT workers unite?' is the title of the next article in the monograph. Yu Hong argues that the 2008 global economic crisis had a tremendous impact upon China's ICT sector. This was the result of many interconnected issues such as domestic under-consumption, global over-production as well as low wages for workers and the heavy reliance on export markets to drive the economy. It remains to be seen whether the resulting impact of the economic down-turn and low wages with resultant labour tensions translate into a collaborative labour movement.

Exploring the main characteristics of China's non-elite knowledge workers as well as the nascent network of labour, Jack Linchuan Qiu pays particular attention to the 'new types of digital work'-call centres, text messaging as well as online gambling businesses. The small scale and informal channels of communication through the new digital tools have opened up transnational networks of labour action. Such networks have become popular among non-elite knowledge workers as they draw upon traditional patterns of networking.

The second half of the monograph addresses the knowledge workers, that is, the creative workers or those working in the cultural industries, beginning with the paper by James F. Tracey and Maris L. Hayashi who provide the perspectives of academic librarians in the Florida state university system in USA. Conducting a survey among librarians who occupy 'a longstanding yet unusual position among knowledge workers', the authors found that the librarians in state universities in Florida are convinced about the power of the unions as channels of representation of librarians' issues and concerns. While the authors state that the librarians are viewed as 'second class citizens' in relation to the teaching faculty, they also suggest that 'creating a national movement of library workers who can articulate an independent vision of academic librarianship distinct from, yet united in important ways, with those of teaching staff'.

While the university librarians have trade union representations, the workers in Brett Caraway's study do not. The knowledge workers in Caraway's study include those on temporary contracts - computer programmers and freelance high-tech workers. In the current economic downturn flexibility in terms of mobilising and demobilising labour according to demand in a growing pool of the self-employed, has a new meaning. Caraway's study shows examples of resistance and compliance, but the workers are also often working alone at home and in a somewhat difficult position to create a collective identity. Nevertheless, the author suggests that future studies should examine power relations among users of online labour markets.

While workers in Caraway's study had a weak collective identity, Nina O'Brien examines the weblogs and their role in collective action in 2007 strike by the Writers Guild of America. The author examined the blog, *United Hollywood* that was informing both members and non-members about the strike. The blog according to Brien enabled 'the construction of a coherent multi-dimensional collective identity around the WGA strike'. Brien concludes that identities that are negotiated 'around consistent themes' transform from 'single identities into a multi-dimensional collective identity'. Expression of this multi-dimensional collective identity went beyond the blog to other on- and off-line interactions.

In the US the new digital technologies facilitated collective identities and actions, documentary workers in Taiwan founded a trade union in 2006 in order to protect their fundamental working rights. Chang-de Liu states that Taiwanese documentary workers suffer from poor working conditions and lack of resources. This is despite the fact that Taiwanese documentaries have increased in popularity since 2000. Whereas the local cinema is dominated by Hollywood, business investment in documentary workers has been somewhat limited. While public subsidies have been forthcoming for Taiwanese documentary makers, the majority have been working in conditions that are unfavourable due to limited budgets. The Documentary Media Workers Union (DMU) established in 2006 faced many challenges. Firstly, many members join the union in order to access labour health insurance and therefore, the DMU was not seen as a workers' organisation, although it affords basic social protection. Other professional organisations in Taiwan are 'association prone' instead of being 'union prone', particularly when it concerns the self-employed. Such professional organisations most noteworthy role 'is to enable members to share their knowledge, experience and skills'. It would be interesting to monitor the evolution of DMU from an occupational union to either a social movement or a professional association as well as the role it plays in the cultural industries in Taiwan.

John A. Lent looks at the conditions in which the global cartooning labour force operates and found that despite the poor working conditions, there are indications of solidarity and resistance. Poor working conditions, limited work opportunities and lay-offs means that cartoonists and animators have limited job security, are isolated and often have no control over their artistic creations. Despite being confronted by such conditions, cartoonists throughout the world are deploying strategies that circumvent the obstacles they face in their work.

This is an important volume for scholars of knowledge workers. Issues that are common among communications workers throughout the world have been raised and the possible avenues for the workers to unite have been presented. As more and more industries are characterised by global value chains, communications, information and cultural workers can and do learn about each other and collectively resist the forces that are changing their work lives through modern communications systems.

## Appendix

### GETTING THE MESSAGE

Communications workers and global value chains

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[http://www.merlinpress.co.uk/acatalog/GETTING\\_THE\\_MESSAGE.html](http://www.merlinpress.co.uk/acatalog/GETTING_THE_MESSAGE.html)

Can knowledge workers of the world unite? This question becomes ever more urgent as telecommunications technology shrinks the world and as more and more work is based on creating, processing and transporting information.

Communications, information and cultural workers hold together the new global value chains that characterise more and more industries. But, with employers responding to global crisis by exerting ever-greater pressure on wages and working conditions, will these workers be able to overcome national and language differences and the divisions between occupational groups to unite against them?

This important collection brings together articles from around the world to assess the state of play. From striking IT workers in China to screenwriters in Hollywood, from postal workers to cartoonists, from librarians to logistics workers, what these workers have in common is that their work is not only embedded in global value chains but also necessary for modern communication to function. This includes communication among workers and the organisations that represent them. The message: knowledge workers can learn a lot from each other about how to understand - and resist - the global forces that are shaping their lives.

Contents: 'Let them move the mail with transistors instead of brains': labour convergence in posts and telecommunications, 1972-3, Caroline Nappo and Dan Schiller; Logistics workers and global logistics: the heavy lifters of globalisation, Roger Sealey; Prospects for trade unions and labour organisations in India's IT and ITES industries, Andrew Stevens and Vincent Mosco; Will Chinese ICT workers unite?: new signs of change in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, Yu Hong; Across the great wall we can reach every corner in the world: network labour in China, Jack Linchuan Qiu; Librarians of the world unite?: Possibilities and realities from Florida USA, James F. Tracy and Maris L. Hayashi; Online Labour Markets: An inquiry into oDesk providers, Brett Caraway; Blogging the Writers Strike: Identity, interaction and engagement for collective action, Nina O'Brien; Social movement unionism or professionalism?: The union movement of Taiwanese documentary makers, Chang-de Liu; The global cartooning labour force: its problems and coping mechanisms, John A. Lent.

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