
Journalists and Trade Unions in Kolkata's Newspapers: Whither collective action?

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Abstract:

This paper explores trade unions' relationship to the notions of journalistic professionalism through a historical study of journalists and newsmen's unions in newspapers in the east Indian city of Kolkata. Much of the literature on the challenges that contemporary journalists face accords with experiences in India: the proliferation of digital ICTs; media concentration and conglomeration; and the rise of contractual employment and decreased collective power of journalists, which have been associated with a loss of bargaining power in newsrooms and the erosion of professional autonomy. A section of scholarship of journalistic labour tends to perceive unionised workforce as a necessary response to the challenges of market economy. Yet, the ability of journalism to exert control over its field of practice vis-a-vis external interests (Waisbord, 2013, p. 56) has long been argued to be an important concept in the narrative of the profession. Arguably, the notion of journalism's "differentiation" from "external interests" has been challenged in a "hybrid digital environment" with people engaging with news in different forms "as audiences, users, producers, sources, experts, or citizens". This further complicates journalist unions' responses to the notions of professionalism. In India, a developing economy where organised labour largely enjoyed democratic rights and freedoms in the era after Independence from British colonial rule, the unions of journalists and other newspaper employees were engaged in a long-drawn struggle for structured wages as recommended by a statutory wage board. Yet unions and the journalistic profession have witnessed complex transformation in a "post-industrial", "entrepreneurial" and "atypical" work environment due to changes in "the dimensions of labour and working conditions" (Deuze & Witschge, 2017, p. 8). Through a historical study of trade unions in Kolkata's newspapers, this paper argues that the notion of professionalism remains significant in the relationship between journalists and unions and in the latter's ability to contribute to democratic action.

Keywords: digital communications, journalists, labour, political economy of journalism, precarity, trade unions, professional autonomy, editorial content

Introduction

The consolidation of market forces in highly capitalist media in advanced industrialised countries altered the nature of journalistic work with less power for journalists in newsrooms and the erosion of professional autonomy in the editorial process. The process of news production and journalistic work began to resemble any other industrial work as the pursuit of bottom-line profit became strong in market-driven news media. Martin (2008, p. 26) quotes Mosco (1996) to suggest that "...making news, like the production of other media content, is a "complex process of production, one that, however unevenly, has come to look more like the labor process in the general economy."" In India, where traditional sectors such as print and television continue to grow hand in hand with the digital unlike the survival crisis of traditional media in much of the developed world, several hundreds of print and broadcast journalists were affected by mass layoffs over the past few years (FICCI-KPMG, 2016; IFJ, 2016). This current spate of job losses emphasises the importance of collective action in Indian journalism.

The role of journalists and other media workers' trade unions remains significant in a discussion of the democratic potential of the media. When journalists and other media workers are unionised it is seen as a scope for democratic communication (McChesney, 2015; Mosco, 2009; 2011; McKercher & Mosco, 2007). It is argued that journalists, when organised as trade unions, protect professional journalistic norms from the commercial interest of owners (McChesney, 2015), encourage professional autonomy and oppose the profit-seeking initiatives of corporate owners (Mosco, 2009; 2011). Strengthening the role of journalistic labour union in the media thus has been proposed as a strategy of media reform (McChesney, 2015; Mosco, 2009; 2011; McKercher & Mosco, 2007, McManus, 2009). However, scholars argue that there remains a difference between the work of journalists as "professionals" and "trade unionists" and argues that journalists "depart from the common characteristics of many professions" to act as trade unionists (Benson, 2008; Gall, 2008). The ability of journalism to exert control over its field of practice vis-a-vis external interests (Waisbord, 2013) remains an important concept in the narrative of the profession. Thus, while discussing their potential to protect professional autonomy, one must also consider the journalist and media workers unions' relationship to the profession. At the same time there tends to be less "differentiation" in the work of journalists in a hybrid digital environment as people engage with news in different forms "as audiences, users, producers, sources, experts, or citizens". This further complicates journalists' relationship to unions as professionals. This paper begins to

explore this question through a historical study of journalists and newsmen's unions in newspapers in the east Indian city of Kolkata, the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal, a setting that had a history of leftist politics that shaped India's trade union movement in the early days. A coalition of left parties, led by a Communist Party of India Marxist (CPIM), remained in power in the state government from 1977 to 2011.

Organised labour in the Indian context largely enjoyed democratic rights and freedom in the decades of rapid industrialisation in the post-Second World War era after the country's independence from British colonial rule (Chibber, 2009). Prominent newspaper unions in India such as the National Union of Journalists, India (NUJI), Indian Journalists' Union (IJU) and All India Newspaper Employees Federation (AINEF) functioned as central trade unions in the post-Independence era and were primarily involved in a long-drawn struggle for structured pay. At the level of national politics unions split into warring factions. Trade unions in general are also linked to the major political parties and the union leadership is especially controlled by the party bosses. Politics in West Bengal emerged into a space for partisan manipulation due to the CPIM's hegemonic control in the state's political map, civil society and every aspect of public life in the past. Despite such splits and divisions in the union movement and the onslaught of market economy in organised labour, trade unions of Indian newspapers remained relevant in their prolonged judicial struggle for achieving statutory recommendation for structured pay (IFJ Report, 2010-11). The Indian context also remains ideal to explore the notion of professionalism. The Indian economy witnessed structural changes since the 1990s with market reforms. Kolkata lagged the rest of the country in corporate investment in the industrial sector (Nielsen, 2010). But the structural changes of Indian economy since the 1990s still triggered ideological changes. Chatterjee (2008) observes that there has been a growing tendency among the urban middle class in the country to view the state apparatus with suspicion (irrespective of whichever political party is in power) and greater social acceptance of the corporate capitalist sector in their commitment to growth and professionalism (Chatterjee, 2008). This further justifies an interest in trade unions' responses and relationship to the notions of professionalism in Kolkata's newspapers. Drawing on the theoretical framework of political economy of communication and sociological studies of the profession and qualitative interviews with journalists and union members, this paper traces the changing relationship between journalists and unions in Kolkata's newspaper history and argues that perceived notions of journalistic professionalism and professional identity remain significant in the possibilities of a united trade union movement.

Qualitative Interviews

For this project 46 in-depth interviews were conducted in Kolkata. The target population of the study consisted of individuals connected with the city's newspaper industry: union members, journalists, the senior editorial staff in decision-making positions and former journalists. The sample included eight union members; two of the interviewed union members were working journalists and the rest were former journalists with major newspapers of Kolkata. Members of the following industry unions were interviewed — National Union of Journalists of India (NUJI) and its state chapter West Bengal Union of Journalists (WBUJ); Indian Journalists Union (IJU) and its state chapter Indian Journalists' Association (IJA); All India Newspaper Employees' Federation (AINEF) and its state chapter, West Bengal Newspaper Employees' Federation (WBNEF). Most major newspapers in Kolkata also have separate unions for employees of each specific organisation that are referred to as plant unions in the industry. But the above-mentioned unions were selected for this study keeping in mind their prominence, reputation and role in the history of union movement in Kolkata's newspaper industry and also because each of these unions had members from across various newspapers. AINEF and its state chapter WBNEF had both journalists and non-journalists as members and had plant unions as members. The qualitative interviews in this research were also complemented by archival studies of union documents and reports.

Journalistic Professionalism: Theoretical Overview

Liberal theories of the press traditionally argued that commercially-run news media, when free from the direct control of the state and guided by competing market condition, can be held accountable to the audiences through self-correcting mechanisms of the marketplace, legal protection ensured by the state and shared journalistic professional values (Curran, 2002; Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 1982; Hackett, 2005). In the early 20th-century American writers such as Walter Lippman argued that the "emergence of professional ethical code insulates journalism from the corruptions of the market" (Kaplan, 2010, p. 27). Professionalism was encouraged by media owners to make their product (news) credible and this enhanced their commercial prospects (McChesney, 2008). Thus, it can be said that journalistic professionalism aims to give legitimacy to the principle of free market media. "...the rise of professionalism proved that the market could coexist peacefully with other social structures, where other value systems and logics of social action prevailed" (Hallin, 2008, pp. 45-46).

Journalistic professionalism refers to the ethos, ideologies and values that determine ideal professional behaviour and legitimise the need of journalism's freedom from government regulations (Curran et al., 1982). Traditionally, in liberal views professional journalism referred primarily to the values of objectivity, impartiality and fairness (Curran, Gurevitch & Woollacott, 2006; Waisbord, 2013). Deuze (2005) summarises a set of values that are associated with professional journalism in an ideal form in liberal theories: public service (journalists' goal of fulfilling public service by imparting impartial information and acting as watchdogs), objectivity, autonomy (journalists' freedom to report without interference), immediacy, and ethics. In India, the press as an institution witnessed statutory freedom ever since the country's independence from British colonial rule in 1947 — free press represented one of the democratic institutions of independent India and was perceived as crucial for effective functioning of a multi-party democracy (Sonwalkar, 2002). The strength of the ideas of free press and freedom of expression and belief in the country's democratic institutions historically shaped the role of journalists in the post-independence era in India. The press emerged as “a major agency of communication, information dissemination and public debate”, “raising public and governmental awareness on a range of issues” including programme and policy failures (Sonwalkar, 2002, p. 825).

Professional Journalists versus Trade Unionists: Responses to Commercialisation:

The concept of value-free “professional” journalist emerges from Durkheimian ideas of differentiation and specialisation of reporting functions (Salcetti, 1995). Professional values allow journalists to assert their occupational authority, group cohesion, professional power and assert themselves as a distinct occupational group in times of social conflict (Schudson, 2001; Schudson & Anderson, 2009). Political-economic critiques of professional journalism posit that differentiation and specialisation of reporting functions do not necessarily translate to journalists' control over their work conditions (Salcetti, 1995). The unionisation or collective action of “media workers”, therefore, is seen as a factor that encourages individual journalists' control over their work process and autonomy (Mosco, 2009; 2011; Gall, 2008). Mosco (2009), for instance, refers to research by Fones-Wolf (2007) that documents how coalitions of citizens and labour organisations in the United States led a strong opposition against cross-ownership or the establishment of media conglomerates in the past and became successful in airing pro-labour shows on corporate-owned networks. Recent research by Salamon (2018) draws attention to strikes by

newsroom employees at *Peterborough Examiner*, a local newspaper in Peterborough city in Canada's Ontario, after it was acquired by the influential Thomson Newspapers chain in 1968.

Historically, Indian newspapers witnessed a strong trade union movement. Prominent newspaper unions in India such as the National Union of Journalists, India (NUJI), Indian Journalists' Union (IJU) and All India Newspaper Employees Federation (AINEF) functioned as central trade unions in the post-Independence era and were primarily involved in a long-drawn struggle for structured pay, as recommended by a statutory wage board. Six wage boards for journalists were set up in India since 1955. Awards by all wage boards in the past were opposed by associations of publishers and owners of newspaper companies, who often challenged the law in the Supreme Court, which happens to be India's highest court, on the ground that the wage awards, as recommended by the board, did not take into the industry's capacity to pay. But the journalists and their unions after a prolonged struggle achieved victory in 2011 when the latest statutory wage board, named after justice GS Majithia, submitted its recommendations of wage revisions, which were accepted by the central government (IFJ Report 2010-2011). Retirement benefits and promotion policy, issues that the unions campaigned over decades, were addressed by the wage board and a standing body was proposed to deal with the wage award's implementation and any other issue involving the working relationship between media owners and journalists (IFJ Report 2010-2011). The latest wage awards also covered contractual workers. In recent years the unions also filed contempt charges against media owners for not implementing the wage awards despite an existing court order — the media owners were directed by the Supreme Court to implement the Majithia board's wage recommendations in full spirit even though the contempt charges were dismissed. The trade unions have also been active in their struggle for press freedom, protecting journalists' rights, safety and in enhancing professional skills (IFJ Report, 2010-11). The Andhra Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ), for instance, also drew attention to corrupt editorial practices such as paid news (the practice of giving favourable news coverage to political parties during elections) in 2009 by initiating sample surveys of newspapers that would highlight and offer an estimate of the magnitude of the practice (IFJ Report, 2010-11).

Referring to scholars, McManus (2009) thus observes that “a strong journalists' union... might resist ethical violations such as running ads as news” (p. 231). Labour union convergences (labour convergence in North America like the merging of the International Typographical Workers

Union (ITU), the Newspaper Guild and the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians under the Communications Workers of America), social movement organisations and global convergence of labour (McKercher & Mosco, 2008) have been perceived as strategies of democratic media reform. Through historical studies of newsworker unions' temporary alliance with university students during strikes in Canada's local newspaper Peterborough Examiner in 1968-69, Salamon (2017, 2018) argues that "temporary labour convergence" (of "knowledge workers" in different sectors) can be seen as a successful campaign strategy for media workers' unions. In India, in the 1980s trade unions of journalists staged a spirited opposition against a proposed Defamation Bill and Bihar Press Bill (seen as a mechanism for censorship of the press), which drew the support of the opposition, trade unions and other members of civil society (Alva, 1982). National-level journalist unions such as NUJI, IJU and AINEF converged with global journalists' unions like International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) over the past decade to jointly work towards protection of journalists' rights, protection and press freedom among other pertinent issues.

At the same time journalism is defined by notions of professionalism that demarcates the profession from trade union activity. Scholars (Benson, 2008; Gall, 2008) observe that the "field of journalism" is driven by its own rules of the game and that journalists must depart from the specific characteristics of the profession to act as trade unions. Gall (2008) differentiates between the work of journalists as "professionals" and "trade unionists" and argues that journalists "depart from the common characteristics of many professions" to act as trade unionists (p. 101). Jemielniak (2012) observes that professionals are often willing to make huge sacrifices for position and prestige even at the cost of obvious economic interest. Referring to scholars, Salamon (2015) observes that "editorial workers" demonstrate the dilemma of the "middle class among employees": It can be said that even though editorial workers/ journalists tend to be exploited within the broader social division of labour, they do not necessarily identify as members of the working class, are often well-educated and privileged as compared with other professions.

Extant literature (Davies, 2008; Donsbach, 2010; McChesney, 2008 ; 2015; McManus, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; 2012; Weaver, 2009) concludes that commercially-run news entities' aggravated concern for profits and the need to reach out to the widest possible audience affect the norms of professional journalism. The developments of capitalist media markets since early 20th century coincided with changes in newsroom

management with owners exercising greater economies of scale over more newsrooms, cutbacks in budgets for journalism and downsizing of journalistic labour (McChesney, 2008; McManus, 2009). These processes have proven to be adverse for ethical journalistic standards and professional autonomy of journalists (Beam, Weaver & Brownlee, 2009; Weaver, 2009). Despite being a fairly diverse and fragmented market as per international standards, trends of integration started to become visible in Indian newspapers since the 2000s — most family-owned media conglomerates moved beyond print to invest in radio, television and the Internet (Kohli-Khandekar, 2010; Thakurta, 2012). The ABP group, Kolkata's leading media conglomerate and the publisher of the largest-selling vernacular newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika* (ABP) and the English daily *The Telegraph*, diversified into multiple media sectors of publishing, broadcasting, mobile and Internet and started to operate as a regional media conglomerate from the late 1990s. In the mid-2000s the ABP group drew foreign investment through a partnership with Star TV that ended in 2012 (Barman & Bhat, 2012). These structural changes triggered ethical concerns like increased influence of advertisers, masquerading of advertisements as news and the impact of various profit-seeking initiatives on editorial content (Kohli-Khandekar, 2010).

Journalistic Professionalism and Trade Unions in a Digital Economy:

These structural changes translated to “prarcarity” (loss of permanent jobs, lack of social security and work insecurities) of journalistic labour; these processes, along with the challenges of a market economy, deregulation, privatisation and digitisation of media industries are also known to have affected journalistic professionalism as well as possibilities of collective action and weakened the power of traditional social groups such as trade unions in media industries (Davies, 2008; Salamon, 2015). Kolkata's news rooms till recent past did not witness significant retrenching of staff. However, media reports said that in February 2017 the ABP group asked hundreds of employees to submit their resignation with immediate effect (Mitra, 2017). A report in the magazine *Outlook* said that the media group cut down jobs and streamlined operations after the eldest son of the family, Aweek Sarkar, stepped down following the group's negative campaign against the ruling party, which came back to power with a thumping victory (Mitra, 2017). The *Outlook* report said that elder Sarkar brother “had great plans for expansion of business with more print content” and thus hired staff for the print business. The “private multinational firm Heys was hired to devise a plan to resuscitate the company” because it had budget deficit and

ran into losses. The new management, led by the younger Sarkar brother, had a different style of working (Mitra, 2017).

The notion of journalism's "differentiation" from "external interests" has been challenged to an extent in a hybrid digital environment. In a digital environment, the central question is how the "fundamental aspects of journalism are questioned, contested, or reinforced" due to the presence of a diversity of actors. Previous scholarship says that "(journalism's) differentiation is less clear in the digital environment" with people engaging with news in different forms "as audiences, users, producers, sources, experts, or citizens" (Witschge, Anderson, Domingo & Hermida, 2016, p. 3). This has been described as a "phenomenon of blurring boundaries" (Witschge et al., 2016). Salamon's (2018) research describes how digital communication tools enabled collective resistance/ action (through classic tactics of boycotts, strikes and class action lawsuits against employers) by freelance journalists (self-employed workers contracted by companies to do short-term assignments) in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom against contracts that forced freelancers to assign the copyrights of their work to the media companies.

Journalistic Professionalism versus Collective Action in Kolkata's Newspapers

In this section I would discuss how the responses of journalists and unions to the notion of journalistic professionalism in Kolkata's newspapers changed over the decades since India's independence. Journalists in Kolkata's united together with other newswriters in the era prior to and in the immediate aftermath of India's independence. This period coincided with landmark judgements that remained significant for press freedom and journalistic autonomy in the country. However, there was less unity between journalists and other newswriters in the following decades.

Journalists as "workers": United movement in pre- and post-Independence era:

The left-leaning political leadership of Bengal had a strong role in organising the trade union movement in the newspapers of Kolkata and the rest of India. The members of the undivided Communist party led journalists and other newspaper employees in united action against the management before and after India's independence from British colonial rule in 1947. There were important strikes in newspapers such as the now defunct Bengali daily *Jugantar*, which were spearheaded by journalists prior

to the independence. But journalists did not have the right to form separate unions at the time and organised in newspapers as workers along with other newspaper employees. The first organised struggle of Indian newspapers began in Kolkata in 1946 by the employees of *Amritabazar Patrika* for fair wages and better working conditions of journalists (Silver Jubilee Conference Pamphlet, AINEF, 1986). The trade unions in Kolkata's now-defunct newspapers, *Amritabazar Patrika* and *Jugantar*, which were controlled by the same newspaper group, were known for militant agitations on wage-related and other issues (Samaddar, 1994). Journalists organised as newspaper employees in the era and remained a part of "plant unions" such as *Patrika-Jugantar employees' union*.

"Journalists were the leaders of these movements and worked alongside non-journalists to organise the movements. Journalists gave the leadership or acted as frontline leaders in most newspaper unions. Journalists and 'non-journalists' worked together in union movement till the middle of the 1950s" (S. Bose, personal communication, 2013).

There was unity in the union movement in the first phase. The majority of employees in Kolkata's leading newspapers such as *The Statesman*, *Anandabazar Patrika* and the now-defunct *Hindustan Standard* (also owned by the ABP group) and *Amritabazar Patrika* were involved in non-editorial work. It was seen as wise to organise with "non-journalists" (non-editorial newswriters) since they comprised the majority. In the post-Independence era trade unions of journalists led a struggle to institute self-regulatory frameworks such as the press council through the country's First Press Commission of 1952. These initiatives led to the creation of journalistic code of ethics and contributed to the development of journalism as a profession. The Working journalist Act was instituted in 1955, which covers rights of journalists like leave (including maternity) and holidays, payment of gratuity, retrenchment, hours of work, compensation for overtime and recommended the setting-up of a wage board. These state-led affirmative action that was seen to have huge implications for the profession in the country was the result of joint trade union movement of journalist and other newspaper employees (S. N. Sinha, personal communication, 2012). Journalists earned the right to form separate trade unions only after independence and began to unionise separately from 1950s onwards. The Indian Federation of Working Journalists (IFWJ) was formed in 1950. Yet, there remained unity between journalists and other newswriters and the trade union movement continued as a united movement of journalists and other newswriters.

Professional Journalists versus Political “Workers”: Splits in Labour Movement:

After India's first statutory wage board made its recommendations in 1956 (accepted by the central government in 1957) there was a realisation that the interests of “non-journalists” were not fully represented. This justified the need for non-editorial newswriters to unionise separately. In the 1970s the trade union movement in Indian newspapers further disintegrated with the growing separation of the work of journalists from “non-journalists”, who were seen to have political identities as opposed to being neutral. This was one of the reasons of the rifts and divisions of organised labour movement. In the 1970s, for instance, there was ideological rift within IFWJ (right-wing factions within the union objected to the left parties' influence) that led to its split into NUJI. NUJI was more influenced by journalists leaning to right wing parties like the Bharatiya Jan Sangha (political predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party). The united union movement weakened as a result of such rifts (S.N. Sinha, personal communication, 2012). Though newspaper unions had no official links with political parties, prominent unions of Kolkata such as the West Bengal Newspaper Employees Federation (WBNEF) (state chapter of All India Newspaper Employees Federation [AINEF], a composite union of journalists and other newswriters) had the support of the leftist political class (Samaddar, 1994). In the late 1960s WBNEF along with Statesman Employees Union (SEU) staged agitations on wage-related issues like bonus, allowances and revision of service conditions through prolonged picketing in the office premises (Silver Jubilee Conference Pamphlet, AINEF, 1986). Significantly, such agitations also drew the support of senior leaders of the leftist political class (Silver Jubilee Conference Pamphlet, AINEF, 1986). Though union members argued that the trade union movement strengthened as a result of political links with West Bengal's leftist political class (Silver Jubilee Conference Pamphlet, AINEF, 1986), such political links also alienated journalists from unions.

The rift between journalists and non-editorial newswriters became conspicuous with important strikes in the post-Emergency era (during the brief period of Emergency rule in India between 1975 and 1977 democratic freedoms and civil rights were withheld with imposition of heavy censorship, arrest of journalists and dissolving of the press council). In 1984 a 72-day strike erupted in *ABP* when the management hired outside labour while the workers attended a union meeting and work was stopped after altercation between union members and outside labour and management staff (Samaddar, 1994). The strike, which raised the demand of pension for employees, also drew the support of the working class led by different

central trade unions and prominent leaders of the trade union affiliated to the then-ruling Communist Party of India (CPIM) (Samaddar, 1994). The publication of the *ABP* was withheld for more than 50 days due to this strike. In the case of this prominent strike led by the WBNEF in *ABP*, journalist unions, WBUJ and IJA, protested the action of withholding the publication of the newspaper and remained distant from strike-related activities, which were perceived as being influenced by the CPIM. Journalists in particular objected to the idea of trade unions withholding the publication of the newspaper because as professional journalists they saw it as an essential duty to provide information.

The nature of our profession (journalism) is such that it cannot fully accommodate the characteristics of a regular trade union movement... Also journalists are dependent on the management in the editorial who assign the beats... (S. Shikdar, personal communication, 2013).

The trade union movement had always been strong among 'non-journalists'. 'Non-journalist' employees had more bargaining power with the management at the level of the production.... Journalist trade unions only became active at the time of attacks on journalists (P. Ghosal, personal communication, 2012).

Significantly, unions such as the WBUJ and IJA represented only journalists; whereas, WBNEF, which was traditionally more powerful than others, enlisted both journalists and other non-editorial newswriters as members and was predominantly stronger among non-editorial, blue-collar newspaper employees. While in India journalists and other newswriters united on the prolonged struggle for the implementation of mandatory wage revision, as recommended by a statutory wage board, there remained distance between different unions on professional issues such as government-led attacks on press freedom. In West Bengal, a press corner in the government secretariat building, then called the Writers' building, was shifted forcibly by the left front government from its past strategic location outside of the chief minister's room to a less prominent position in 1992 (after political opposition-led protests at the press corner). Kolkata's journalists, who perceived this incident as a state government-led attack on press freedom, united on behalf of the local press club rather than as a union to protest the forced change of location of the press corner. WBNEF, perceived to be close to the left political leadership, refused to join journalists in their action against perceived injustice by the state government.

Journalists as anti-government and neutral: Professionalism in Post-Reform era:

The necessity to be critical of the government was perceived as a key professional role by journalists in Kolkata in the post-1990s era when the media witnessed capitalist development. In the 1980s and 1990s, the CPIM-led state government in West Bengal had thumping victories in consecutive elections despite failures in governance, administration and discontent of voters (especially the urban middle class) at its poor civic services, the existence of a non-performing government bureaucracy and the decline of academic standards in state-run schools and high rate of unemployment (Basu, 2007; Banerjee, 2007). Many journalists witnessed the ruling party's power excesses for decades. This contextualises the importance of the government watchdog role in Kolkata's newspaper landscape.

...newspapers have a role in keeping a check on the government.... I happened to witness the misrule of the CPIM government since 1980 when I started working as a journalist (A. Ghosh, personal communication, 2012).

... (when) they (the government) become anti-people, then we are critical (S. Sen, personal communication, 2012).

In 2006 and 2007, when the left front government announced plans of acquiring agricultural land for corporate industrial projects (a small car factory for India's leading industrial group Tata Motors and chemical hubs and industries for Indonesia-based Salim group), there emerged massive oppositional peasant protests that united activists, intellectuals, civil society members and members of political parties of different ideological affiliations (Nielsen, 2009). When there was violence and physical attacks on journalists by the cadre of the ruling party in 2007, journalist unions in particular organised protests under the banner of WBUJ and IJA. But WBNEF, perceived to be linked to the ruling party, stayed away from the protests organised by journalists.

Even though mainstream politics in the state emerged as a space for political contestation, Kolkata's journalists shared the professional values of objectivity and information dissemination.

Misrule is misrule. There is no need to specify this as CPIM's misrule. Whoever stays in power... the state power has a certain character... (S. Mitra, personal communication, 2012).

I didn't share any pathological anger against the CPIM... (A. Ghosh, personal communication, 2012).

The rise of 24-hour Bengali news television in Kolkata's media landscape from the mid-2000s further encouraged journalists to be professional and neutral. Journalists could not afford to ignore important news at a time when readers already had access to important news related to the protests through other sources of information such as 24-hour local television.

This is not a period when there is no television... If a newspaper doesn't publish news you will not read it anymore... Credibility issue, that's the main branding (S. Sen, personal communication, 2012).

I tried to gather the main facts as a reporter... I presented the incident in a neutral manner to my chief reporter. Then we decided if we could carry the story or how much information we could reveal (C. Mandal, personal communication, 2012).

Professionalisation of Journalist Unions:

The WBNEF, which traditionally remained stronger as compared with other unions, lost power after the left's election losses in the state since 2011. Since 2008, journalist unions such as WBUJ and IJA remained primarily engaged in professional activities such as training and skill development of journalists. These unions also raised awareness on issues such as the attacks on journalists by the police and their protection and self-defence in the face of attacks. NUJI also ran a journalism school as part of its professional activities, apart from efforts in increasing membership strength. While unions traditionally represented only print journalists in India, NUJI, WBUJ and IJA also worked to enlist as members the journalists of privately-run television news media. From the late 1990s onwards contractual employment became common in Kolkata's newspapers, which affected the working conditions of journalists and led to employment-related insecurities. The system of contractual employment of journalists was initiated in Indian newspapers by *The Times of India (TOI)* and was followed by big players such as the *ABP* in Kolkata. While journalist unions such as WBJU and IJA in Kolkata protested attacks on journalists and other issues of press freedom, there were no organised movement against the management's policies of contractual employment that caused job-related insecurities among journalists. The WBUJ and IJA also did not raise issues such as editorial freedom or journalists' control over their work processes in newsrooms despite unionised journalists significant presence in big newspapers such as the *ABP*.

We are not in conflict with the management... we are vocal only on wage-related issues and matters of professional training (D. Ray, personal communication, 2011).

We started a plant union in *ABP* (ABP Group of Publications Journalist Union) (affiliated to WBUJ)... We do not have a control on the owners' business policy. We cannot take a stand... we don't want to protest on these matters (D. Ray, personal communication, 2011).

Proprietors' ideological values often determined the editorial policy of Kolkata's newspapers. The intrusion of the advertising into the editorial remained common especially in the Kolkata edition of the *TOI*. But editorial freedom has not emerged as a significant agenda for journalists' organised movement in Kolkata's newspapers.

Editorial policy affects a journalist's work in the sense that one has to conceal facts in some instances and in other instances one has to play up certain things... (C. Mandal, personal communication, 2012).

While Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ), Bombay Union of Journalists and Kerala Union of Working Journalists (KUWJ) protested against job losses of journalists in the city edition of *Hindustan Times* (*HT*), *The Telegraph* and *ABP* (both owned by the ABP group) as these dailies scrapped departments, shelved editions and folded bureaus in 2017, Kolkata's unions remained relatively silent on job losses. Big newspapers such as the *ABP* lagged in the process digitisation than other major Indian dailies such as *Dainik Jagram*, *Hindustan Times* and *Malayalam Manorama*. As compared with the rest of India, there remained less scope for Kolkata's journalists to work in digital platforms.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper suggest the following: In the pre- and immediate post-Independence era, journalists organised as workers along with other newswriters, which contributed to the collective strength of organised labour in Kolkata's newspapers. In the following decades, there emerged split between journalists and other newswriters, perceived as non-journalists, on the basis of growing professionalisation. This process also weakened the union movement. Thus this research suggests that journalistic professionalism remains significant in the process of collective action of media workers and for unions to contribute to democratic media reform. This paper thus also seeks to elaborate on the meanings of journalism professionalism in Kolkata's newspapers that witnessed capitalist development since the late 1990s.

Significantly, in India the role of the press and journalists turned exceptionally adversarial in the 1970s, especially during the brief period of

Emergency rule (Sonwalkar, 2002). This period witnessed spirited struggle by sections of the press and journalists (Sonwalkar, 2002). The Indian press' hostile attitude to the government further heightened in the following decades with the newspapers' less dependence on government revenues, the rise of advertising and the growth of media markets. These processes can be seen as pertinent in the notions of journalistic professionalism in Kolkata's newspapers. The traditional liberal notion of press/ professional journalists as the government watchdog is said to have lost some of its democratic potential in an era when "the media are themselves so powerful that they, in some estimations, form the stage on which much politics is carried out" (Matheson, 2010, p. 83). In post-Soviet Russian media system, for instance, investigative journalism or the watchdog role encourages journalists to expose only the misdeeds of the Soviet era, while the power excesses of the present political formations are often ignored (Vartanova, 2012). Chatterjee (2008) observes that the shifts in India's macroeconomic framework in the 1990s translated to the "dismantling of the licence regime, greater entry of foreign capital and foreign consumer goods", "the opening up of sectors such as telecommunications, transport, infrastructure, mining, banking, insurance, etc, to private capital", "many more entrants into the capitalist class" and ascendancy of the relative power of the corporate capitalist class over that of other social groups (p. 56). The left, which lost political legitimacy in its traditional bastion of West Bengal and the rest of the country over the past decade, remained indistinguishable from any other political parties, committed to neoliberal agenda, and clearly fell in line with the neoliberal reforms initiated in India since the 1990s (Menon & Nigam, 2007). In this context, journalists' necessity to be anti-government/professional can be interpreted as the urban middle class' need to view the state apparatus with suspicion (irrespective of whichever political party is in power) and greater social acceptance of the corporate capitalist sector in their commitment to growth and professionalism (Chatterjee, 2008). These processes, on the whole, show journalists' "visible advance towards elitism and professionalism" (Jemielniak, 2012, p. 41), processes that have been common among programmers, IT engineers and other knowledge workers. While trade unions help in the battle to improve working conditions, pay, working hours and job security, this has been argued to be a "hazardous step" as regards the professionalisation of "high-tech jobs" (Jemielniak, 2012). This paper suggests that studies of communication workers' unionisation must explore journalists' relationship to professionalism.

While capitalist development of the news media, deregulation, privatisation and digitisation of media industries, coupled with contractual/the precarity of labour, weakened the power of print unions (Davies, 2008;

Salamon, 2015), this paper also refrains from a universal history of capital. For instance, in India state chapters of national unions in Bombay, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala (BUJ, APUWJ and KUWJ) remained stronger than others in collective bargaining with the management. Kolkata lagged the rest of the country in corporate capitalist industrial development and in capitalist investment in the industrial sector (Nielsen, 2010). Yet, organised labour in Kolkata's newspapers remained weak even though organised left political movement in West Bengal historically marked the beginning of trade union movement in Indian newspapers in the post-War era. Politics in West Bengal emerged as a space for partisan manipulation in the 1980s and 1990s because of the then ruling left's strategy of using the administration to consolidate its party base in the countryside, of allowing its party bosses in the districts and villages to control daily administration and state institutions and its hegemonic grip at every level of civil society (Banerjee, 2007; 2011). Reports of corruption and human rights violations by the CPIM party apparatchiki remained rampant in the 1980s. These political processes seek to explain the meanings of professionalism and journalists' necessity to be professional/ anti-government in Kolkata's newspapers. The research suggests that the "professional-non-professional" binary is manifested through the "split" between the "non-political" (journalists as government watchdog) and "political" ("non-journalists"/unions) in Kolkata's newspapers. Traditional Marxist analyses underplay the influence of journalistic professionalism in media production (Curran et al., 1982, p. 14) even though professional journalistic norms are known to find support in multiple societies in different forms (Weaver, 2009; Waisbord, 2013; Schudson & Anderson, 2009). The presence of trade unions in the media has been recognised by UNESCO as a key indicator for journalistic professionalism and democratic development of the media (UNESCO Report, 2008). This research aims to show the way forward for media workers' trade unions by emphasising the necessity of closer links between the profession and traditional union action.

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