

# A case study of newspaper delivery labour as a blind spot in the political economy of communication

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## SUMMARY

*The paper analyses newspaper delivery labour by focusing on two Slovenian companies: the media company Dnevnik and the distribution company Izberi. In response to the enduring trend of declining readership, Dnevnik attempted to cut its delivery costs by transferring that activity to a rival company Izberi, a move met with resistance from deliverers adversely affected by the transfer. Using the methods of in-depth interviews and document analysis, the paper aims to identify the economic rationalisation techniques used to reduce the costs of delivery labour, discipline the workforce and respond to the newspaper deliverers' resistance to these techniques.*

Key words: newswork, newspaper delivery, management control, collective bargaining

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## Introduction

*“Deliverers were always an important factor, although they were sometimes not recognised as such because the journalistic community always thought of itself as if they are greater than gods.”*

### **Former head of distribution at Dnevnik**

Mainstream communication, media and journalism studies only sporadically analyse news as a product of human labour (cf. Hardt, 1990; Brennen, 1995; Im, 1997), while journalism is rarely investigated as labour (cf. Örnebring, 2010). This lack of attention led Mosco and McKercher (2008: vii) to note that labour is a notable blind spot in communication scholarship. A significant part of the research project of the political economy of communication has been to address such blind spots. Even though this tradition has addressed several neglected areas, it is a project that has hardly finished. Political economy also incurs its own blind spots, including in topics it has traditionally covered. Labour is just one of those topics and, despite recently receiving some noteworthy attention (cf. Maxwell, 2016), some areas remain under-researched. Distribution has historically been vital for capitalist newspaper industries and been subjected to the same techniques of economic rationality characteristic of labour in other spheres of capitalist accumulation. Yet, even within the perspective of the critical political economy of communication, newswriters other than editors, journalists and other newsroom staffers, whom McKercher (2002: 1) refers to as “white collar newswriters”, have only exceptionally been given serious scholarly attention.

This implicit hierarchy in scholarly attention reflects the narrow focus of conceptualisations of “newswriters” (Hardt, 1995) and other “knowledge workers” (Mosco and McKercher, 2008), definitions of whom only rarely include all types of labour in the value chain of producing and distributing knowledge. This also indicates a lack of comprehensive insight into the experiences of people working under the institutional and technological constraints of the news industry and who are all crucial to the functioning of journalism in capitalist societies (cf. Hardt and Brennen, 1995). Instead of investigating labour in the sphere of content production, a common approach taken in communication scholarship when focusing on labour, this study emphasises the neglected sphere of distribution.

There are two reasons for adopting this focus. On one hand, investigating delivery labour in the news industry enables us to address the historical separation between newsroom labour and other newswriters arising from journalism’s professionalisation project and its troubling implications for the collective struggle (cf. Hardt, 1996; Nerone, in this issue). On the other hand, the focus allows us to explore labour

relations in news distribution that have always been tied to how information and communication technologies are used according to capitalist logics – from upscaling to the “mass distribution” of the industrialised press over 100 years ago (Nerone and Barnhurst, 2003), through unrealized participatory potentials of broadcasting, initially radio as “apparatus of communication” (Brecht, 1932/1993), to worrying developments in the personalisation of digital news delivery (Carlson, 2017). In this sense, the study analyses newspaper delivery labour by looking at two Slovenian firms: the media company Dnevnik and the distribution company Izberi. In 2014, Dnevnik outsourced its distribution activity to the latter. The main intention is to identify techniques of economic rationalisation which may be applied to cut the costs of delivery labour and increase labour control, and explore the potential of the collective struggle against these techniques and relations not only by newspaper deliverers, but also other newswriters.

We proceed from the standpoints of the critical theory of society and political economy of communication as we believe it is vital to base one’s research on these paradigmatic traditions because at the centre of their project they retain a critique of domination and exploitation. These two strands of thought are today still considered key theoretical approaches in critical media and communication studies, while both are based in the Marxist theoretical, conceptual and philosophical framework.

## **Distribution labour in the news industry**

Despite being central for enriching capital in the news industry, distribution labour rarely attracts much attention from critical communication scholars. Even in critical discussions addressing the professionalisation of journalism as a management strategy of “separating shared labour interests” of newswriters (Hardt, 1996: 31), delivery labour is pushed into the background, while printers and newsroom workers take central stage. One of the rare in-depth accounts is Bekken’s (1995) historical study on “newsboys”, male and female street sellers and newspaper deliverers, who “offer a potent symbol of the capitalist system at work” (ibid.: 190). By moving beyond the prevailing view of ‘newsboys’ as a social problem, particularly in terms of child labour (cf. Leonard, 2002), and by approaching them as newswriters, Bekken (1995) finds that newspaper delivery labour in the United States depends financially on the goodwill of the publishers. ‘Newsboys’ suffer from poor working conditions and low payment, but are also able to organise strikes, unionise their struggle and seek recognition within the industry. In Bekken’s analysis, most ‘newsboys’ – even as adult deliverers of newspapers – continue to earn less than the minimum wage even in optimal conditions, and run the risk of having their earnings reduced by the logic of risky labour relations (ibid.). Similar precarious conditions can be

observed for different occupations within the news industry and across countries given that the biggest motive is to reduce production costs and hedge the uneasy newspaper business dynamics in the ever-changing communication environment (cf. Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009; Deuze and Fortunati, 2010).

Namely, in the last decade or so the industry has been struggling to cope with a steep decline in newspaper circulations and advertising revenues, and fragmentation of channels and media audiences, all considerably negatively impacting the profitability of newspapers (e.g. Gitlin, 2009; Anderson, 2013; Phillips, 2015). These circumstances have been used to justify the reshaping of newswork to precarious labour conditions characterised by uncertainty and flexibility (e.g. Deuze, 2007; Compton and Benedetti, 2010; Paulussen, 2012; Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016). In recent years, newswriters in the newsroom have been experiencing job insecurity, outsourcing, mass lay-offs (Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009; Deuze and Fortunati, 2010; Cohen, 2015), deskilling due to the need to multitask (Vobič, 2015) as well as the risk of burning out (Reinardy, 2011). Newswriters outside of the newsroom, such as printers and newspaper deliverers, have had it even worse, even being at risk of becoming redundant in the Internet era as newspaper industries search for new business models beyond ink-on-paper ones (cf. Grueskin et al., 2011).

Technological convergence, the result of applying digital technologies to everyday labour, has been reconstituting the labour process within newspapers since the 1970s (McKercher, 2002: 44–45). Multiple steps between the editor's desk and the mailbox have been eliminated, particularly by introducing computers and telecommunications. The industry has reshaped the production and distribution chain by concentrating on utility, profitability and productivity (cf. Örnebring, 2010). Further, the Internet's rise as a technological framework and communication environment has introduced "paper-less" or "press-less newspapers" (McKercher, 2002) that are also produced by traditional print media institutions. In the United States (cf. Newspaperdeathwatch.com), presses are being shut down at the local level while those newspapers that remain operational are going digital-only and eliminating the need for deliverers as workers altogether.

The decline of the printed newspaper in the news environment is accompanied by the growing difficulty of separating production and distribution in the digitised news industry (van der Haak et al., 2011: 2926). While in some newsrooms, journalists and editors are becoming gatherers, interpreters and producers of news, as well as their disseminators, in others this work is performed by algorithms, leading to a discussion of the "posthuman future of digital news" (cf. Carlson 2017). In institutional contexts, not only production but also distribution labour are largely embodied in the highly standardised and even automated arrangements found in contemporary newsrooms (cf. Cohen, 2015). At the same time, media industries rely on

free audience labour for news distribution, namely, by personalising their own engagement online and by spreading content through social networks (Fuchs, 2014; Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016).

## Newspaper industry crisis and labour relations in the Slovenian context

For at least a decade, print media circulations in Slovenia have been falling, especially since the start of the global economic crisis impacting Slovenia in 2009. As newsstand sales have been dropping faster than subscriptions, the relative share of subscriptions in total sold circulation has been steadily increasing.

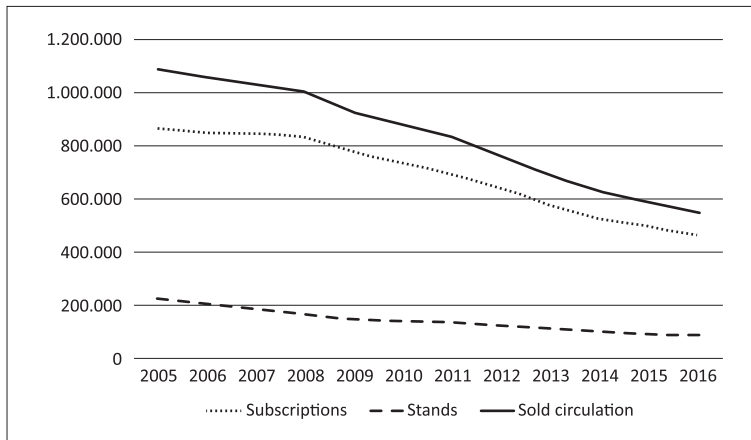


Figure 1. Sold circulation, newsstand sales and subscription sales for the five biggest national daily newspapers combined (Dnevnik, Delo, Slovenske novice, Večer, Finance)

*Slika 1. Ukupna prodana naklada, prodaja u kioscima i prodaja preko preplate pet najvećih nacionalnih dnevnih novina (Dnevnik, Delo, Slovenske novice, Večer, Finance)*

The daily newspaper Dnevnik was able to defy the trend of declining sold circulation up until the first quarter of 2008, mainly due to a rise in subscriptions (cf. Figure 2), but since then has faced falling circulation.

As a result, the daily Dnevnik has an above-average subscription circulation/sold circulation ratio, first exceeding 90% in early 2009 and reaching 93% in 2016 (cf. Figure 3). Consequently, the newspaper is in a situation where simultaneously it is

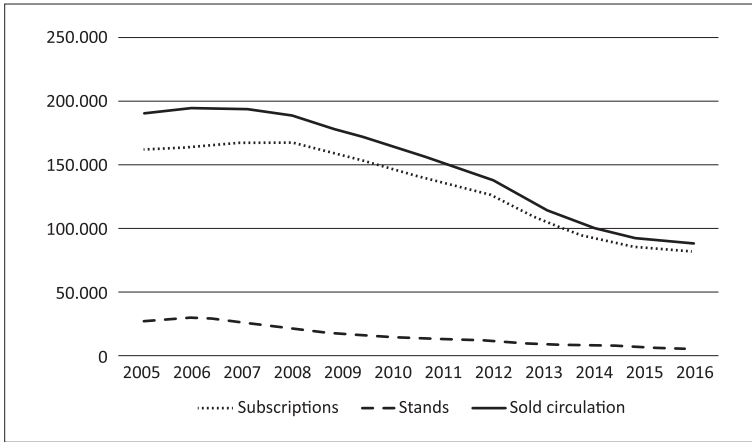


Figure 2. Sold circulation, newsstand circulation and subscription circulation for the daily Dnevnik

Slika 2. Prodana naklada, prodaja u kioscima i prodaja preko preplate dnevnih novina Dnevnik

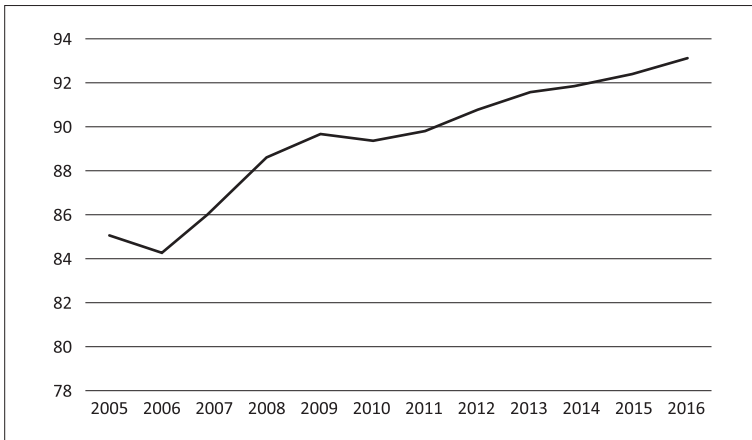


Figure 3. Subscriptions as a share of sold circulation for Dnevnik

Slika 3. Preplata kao udio prodane naklade Dnevnika

becoming ever more dependent on subscriptions and thus also on the regular and quality delivery of newspapers to its subscribers, while being unable to financially support the delivery of those very same newspapers to the subscribers.

At the same time, advertisers decreased their advertising expenditures during the economic crisis and simultaneously concentrated on television advertising (cf. Milosavljević and Kerševan Smokvina 2012, 82–84). Due to the failure of Dnevnik's attempt to monetise its online audiences via a “national paywall” – whereby competing newspaper publishers in Slovenia formed a joint venture to set up and run a paywall through the Piano Media company (cf. Vobič, 2012), the company opted for its own monetising system in mid-2015 that favours printed newspaper subscribers over digital-only ones (cf. Dnevnik, 2015).

Lacking any viable plan to increase their incomes, media organisations in general and the print media specifically have instead turned to ways to lower expenditure, primarily by cutting labour costs. In this context, different studies (Vobič, 2013; Vobič and Brlek Slaček, 2014) offer further disturbing evidence of the larger process of the “pauperisation of journalism” (Splichal and Dahlgren, 2016: 8), a process characterised by the proliferation of the profit-driven standardisation of newswork and the rise of precarious labour relations across the newspaper industry. Historically speaking, this may be considered a somewhat uncommon tendency for Slovenia, largely seen as a relatively successful transitional country in the 1990s that has retained a high degree of social cohesion. As pointed out by Stanojevič (2006), this involved softer policies when it came to the reconstruction of companies, and “rigid” regulation of the labour market, allowing only modest external flexibility. In contrast to many other post-socialist countries, Slovenia's institutional arrangements have thus retained a high degree of sensitivity to the interests of labour, with relatively high wages and secure jobs (ibid.). Powerful oppositional trade unions found within companies have contributed significantly to this situation. In spite of this, however, companies survived in competitive global markets, which was organisationally achieved through the intensification of labour, including weekend labour, shift work and overtime (ibid.). In the period since Slovenia joined the European Union and adopted its standards, contributing to a new wave of privatisation, the growth of public and private debt, and mass redundancies during the crisis, things have started to shift. We are witnessing rising numbers of various flexible positions and precarious labour arrangements, such as fixed-term, part-time contracts, student work, civil work contracts and self-employment, as well as the greater intensification of labour for those who have kept their jobs (Ignjatović and Kanjuo Mrčela, 2016: 4). Almost a decade ago, Stanojevič (2006: 176) already noticed this trend of a growing number of fixed-term workers, consisting mostly of younger generations.

Journalists often draw attention to the normalisation of various kinds of freelance, informal and otherwise contingent temporary newswork (cf. Society of Slovenian Journalists, 2014), but have hardly considered exploitation, precarisation and rationalisation in the area of newspaper delivery among leading Slovenian newspa-

pers. There is also a lack of scholarly research into distribution in the Slovenian news industry. Critical analyses of labour in journalism put more emphasis on journalists and editors (cf. Vobič, 2013; Vobič and Brlek Slaček, 2014) than on other newswriters in the news production and distribution chain. In any case, distribution labour has not been left untouched by the substantial changes occurring to Slovenian journalism in the last two decades as market forces become increasingly dominant in the news industry (cf. Vobič, 2015).

In the context of these changes, the activity of newspaper deliverers of Dnevnik, one of the leading Slovenian national newspapers (cf. Revised Sold Circulation, 2014) has been outsourced to self-employed newswriters since the mid-1990s (cf. Free Trade Union of Slovenia, 2014). In early 2014, the newspaper ended the temporary contracts with its deliverers, informing them that the delivery of the Dnevnik printed editions would be 'transferred' to a subsidiary company Izberi, paradoxically owned by a competitor of Dnevnik, the newspaper Delo (ibid.). While most of Dnevnik's newspaper deliverers were already working for both companies, those working only for Dnevnik faced the prospect of losing their job (ibid.). Even when that was not the case they were confronted by a drop in their incomes and, in response, organised themselves within the Free Trade Union of Slovenia and threatened to boycott the delivery of Dnevnik. Although the union, Dnevnik and Izberi could not reach an official agreement, many former Dnevnik deliverers started to work for Izberi and continued to deliver Dnevnik and other publications to subscribers' doorsteps (ibid.). Yet this 'transfer' of workers involved in delivering the newspaper has received only minor public attention – Dnevnik (2014) published a piece on its news website, but one that appears closer to a public relations item than journalistic contribution. This study aims to shed more light on the case, particularly on three aspects: the processes of managerial decision-making and collective bargaining, management's attempts to reduce the costs of and to control delivery labour, and the potential of the collective struggle of newswriters in the Slovenian newspaper industry.

## **Research questions, research methods**

The study focuses on the practical micro-context of labour relations in the area of newspaper delivery (specifically at Dnevnik), but at the same time embeds them in the capitalist logics of the Slovenian news industry and more general rationalising practices characterising capitalist accumulation. In order to do this, we explore the labour histories of newspaper deliverers while analysing institutional documents as well as Dnevnik and Izberi's narrations of the management in this context. We pose two research questions:



**RQ1:** Which techniques does the Dnevnik newspaper's management use to reduce the costs of newspaper delivery labour and maintain control over newspaper deliverers?

**RQ2:** Which conditions increase or decrease the deliverers' ability to collectively organise and resist management?

To deal with these research questions, we employ a triangulation of qualitative methods to enlarge perspectives to allow for a fuller treatment, description and explanation of delivery labour in the newspaper industry in Slovenia. When focusing on the case of the Slovenian newspaper Dnevnik and the newspaper delivery and distribution company Izberi, we adopt three qualitative methods.

To deal with both research questions, we apply document analysis as a method for investigating "certain kinds of organizational rationality at work" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 117) with respect to the delivery labour. We gathered three types of past and current documents in order to explore management strategies and ways of regulating relationships between management and labour at Dnevnik and Izberi: work contracts, work protocols, and annual reports. By taking account of who produced the institutional documents, for which purposes and what institutional context, analysis of these materials permitted a close look but still a limited insight into the experiences, relations and processes (Flick, 2006: 251). A major problem in analysing the documents appeared to be how to conceive the relations between explicit content, implicit meaning and the context of functions, and the use of those documents. We therefore considered documents as evidence that reflects past and present communication among certain parties for specific gains in the profit-oriented newspaper business.

After analysing the documentary material, we used two types of interviews where the insights of the document analysis were used to contextually ground and steer the interview conversations. To address the first research question, we applied the method of oral history interviews. In August and September 2014, we conducted such open-interview conversations with six Dnevnik newspaper deliverers (cf. Appendix), explored their personal perspectives, gathered detailed information about their working lives, and identified the diachronic discontinuities of delivery labour at Dnevnik (cf. Conway, 2014). As this method of a "collaborative (auto)biography interview" (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2005) is far less focused and more open-ended than most qualitative interviewing, we were able to see historical processes and circumstances concerning the interviewees' working life in ways that helped us understand individual agency within the context of the changing social and material labour environment (cf. Perks and Thomson, 1998). Due to the sensitivity of the case study, the deliverers agreed to be interviewed on the condition of complete anonymity, thus their names and any other identifying information are omitted in the analysis below.

To explore the second research question, we conducted in-depth interviews with members of the business, editorial and trade union management in August and September 2014: director for research and development at Dnevnik, head of desk and digitalisation project at Dnevnik, a representative of newspaper deliverers at the Free Trade Union of Slovenia, and managing director of the delivery company Izberi (cf. the Appendix). Unlike oral histories, these interview conversations were more structured – based on a theoretically and contextually informed interview guide, but still open to allow new aspects, views and ideas to be brought up. These semi-structured interviews were characterised by three criteria (Flick, 2006: 161): “problem centring” (i.e. articulation of the imperative to control labour in the institutional mindset at Dnevnik and Izberi), “object orientation” (i.e. specific roles of interviewees, members of business, editorial and trade union management, in the instrumentalisation of newspaper delivery labour), and “process orientation” (i.e. the institutionalised micro-context of delivery labour relations at Dnevnik embedded in the capitalist totality). By omitting the interviewees’ names, we have put emphasis on particular structural positions of managers, editors and unionists with respect to delivery labour. However, a possibility exists that they are identifiable based on their functions at the time of the interviews by those familiar with the newspaper industry in Slovenia (cf. Appendix).

After conducting the oral histories and problem-centred interviews, we transcribed them in full and applied McCracken’s (1988: 41–46) five-step process of qualitative interview analysis. First, on the basis of a first careful reading, preliminary descriptive and interpretative categories were identified with respect to the theoretical basis and contextual background of the case. Then, by further examining connections in the interview narratives were identified – not only those of consistency, but also contradictions. From there, the analysis involved a determination of dominant patterns and then basic themes by examining constant and contradictory clusters of interviewee comments. Lastly, we examined themes from all interviews across such groupings to delineate the dominant properties relative to the two research questions. The transcriptions of the interviews and other research documentation is accessible in the Social Science Data Archives of the Faculty of Social Sciences in Ljubljana (cf. Slaček Brlek et al., 2014/2017).

## **Results: Techniques of economic rationalisation and Dnevnik newspaper deliverers**

The goal of profit maximisation can be achieved by capital through different methods and management techniques. Several were already analysed by Marx (1976/1990), especially time-saving efforts and labour-intensification methods,

with Thompson (1967) providing a classic study of the role played by time in disciplining workers in capitalism. Not all methods are of course appropriate for all types of labour, differences being especially accentuated when comparing classic industrial labour with so-called post-Fordist labour. Following Friedman's distinction between "direct control" and "responsible autonomy", Liepietz (1997) claims that a shift has taken place from classic industrial labour, which was chiefly based on direct control (a Fordist/Taylorist constellation), to post-Fordist labour, emphasising responsible autonomy (and consequently strengthening precarity) as a superior organising principle. Burawoy (1985) made a similar claim about the roles of coercion and consent in extracting surplus labour: he contends that what he calls the despotic production regime, which was largely based on coercion, has been superseded in advanced capitalist societies by a hegemonic production regime based on consent, which itself has been superseded by a mixed regime he refers to as hegemonic despotism (cf. Burawoy, 2004).

Burawoy has been criticised for replacing "Braverman's linear conception of the evolution of control strategies" with his own version rather than "acknowledging that there are a number of dimensions and strategies of control, often used in the same time period and frequently in combination" (Thompson, 1990: 98). While we do not fully agree with this criticism, given that claims of historic shifts in the dominant character of managerial control need not contradict the existence of a plurality of control strategies, we do agree that a focus on the diversity of control strategies at a given historical juncture is required to complement and enhance analyses of broader historical trends. Such perspectives have been productively adopted in the analysis of news production, for example by Im (1997) when focusing on how the division of labour has led to different control strategies for "central" and "peripheral" workers, where the centrality and peripherality of certain groups of workers is itself historically variable.

By concentrating on newspaper deliverers as a specific group inside the value chain of the production and distribution of news, we attempt to contribute to the understanding of the plurality of control strategies in the news industry. Our intention is to provide a detailed understanding of the economic rationalisation techniques utilised to cut the costs of newspaper delivery with the aim of increasing profits, focusing on how the specific nature and position of delivery labour shapes these techniques. We distinguished three areas in which capital asserts its dominance over labour.

- a) *Decreasing costs of labour*, i.e. shifting the costs and risks of production over to workers; automation and/or improvements in the means of production; intensification of the production process; direct pressure on wages; extending the length of the working day; workforce reductions; lack of attention to safe working conditions; employment of time-saving techniques and other means for increasing productivity.

- b) *Control of the labour process*, i.e. monitoring of the production processes and workers (or formal autonomy in work); control of the means of production and/or raw materials, the division and organisation of labour, skill reproduction, the actual output (what/how is it produced and to whom is it sold) and income (cf. Standing. 2009: 20–21).
- c) *Collective bargaining and bargaining position*, i.e. assaults on unions (restricting, weakening and preventing organisation); individualisation and flexibilisation of employment arrangements and conditions; outsourcing of labour to and from other companies; using sanctions to secure consent of the workers (threat of lay-offs, decreasing wages, taking away financial incentives, informal demotions, mobbing); strengthening internal and external competition between workers.

### **Decreasing costs of labour**

At first glance, it might seem difficult to intensify delivery labour. Employers are fairly limited when it comes to lengthening the working day. Newspapers must be delivered in the morning, mostly by 7 a.m. due to a fear many subscribers would otherwise cancel their subscription. Similarly, due to the specifics of newspaper delivery, largely performed by riding motorcycles and only rarely with cars or small vans, there is at present little room to automate this type of labour regardless of the recent drone delivery experiments (Stewart 2017) or to significantly improve the means used for newspaper distribution.

In this context, Izberi and Dnevnik have chiefly focused on reducing the incomes of the deliverers. Because newspaper deliverers are paid a piece rate, their incomes already dropped automatically as subscriptions to the newspaper fell. Our interviewees had clearly noticed this happening in the last couple of years, meaning the employer was able to transfer some of the lost income from the falling newspaper circulation to the deliverers. The fact the deliverers are mostly self-employed also means the company can shift fixed costs like the purchase and maintenance of the vehicles and accounting costs onto them. Since newspapers' circulations and thus income are decreasing drastically, fixed costs are becoming an ever more relevant factor. Yet, as a consequence of the steep drop in circulation beginning in 2008, Dnevnik was looking to cut its distribution costs even further.

The distribution activity was transferred to Izberi – in the words of interviewees – to “rationalise distribution”, namely to cut delivery costs per newspaper delivered. The Research Director and the Distribution Director pointed out that economies of scale, due to the fact the same company now delivers newspapers from different publishers, has played a huge part in the significantly cheaper delivery costs. “You still have some economies of scale here, because for every delivery we get cents, we collect

cents and pass on cents. And these are still relatively big quantities and it adds up. With Dnevnik, we now deliver almost three million copies a month. And that is not a negligible number.” (Distribution Director) As the number of subscribers has gone down, the delivery costs per newspaper have been rising significantly. There is no vast difference in delivering one newspaper to a block of flats or twenty newspapers, while the total size of the delivery area has not shrunken significantly. On average, it therefore takes more time to deliver one newspaper, while the company also had to pay the deliverers’ fuel costs.

*They wanted to show big results before they merged. Because of one newspaper, I must drive three kilometres in one way and then also back, and right around the time when we deliver this misfortune, a train comes – railway barriers. 15 minutes there, 15 minutes back. That’s half an hour. You can’t make this up. And you can’t make them understand this. That’s such a loss. I can do half of one area in half an hour. Half an hour means a lot. (Deliverer5)*

The managements of Dnevnik and Izberi did not want to give us figures on how much Dnevnik saved with the outsourcing, but both the Former Distribution Head and Newspaper Unionist mentioned the numbers were huge, with the Newspaper Unionist stating he had heard it could be up to half a million euros per year. Deliverer1 mentioned in the interview how he had heard people at Dnevnik bragging they consider this to be “the deal of the century”.

The key difference for the workers delivering newspaper when the transfer of distribution from Dnevnik to Izberi happened was the significantly lower incomes for those retaining their jobs and unemployment for those whose delivery routes were already covered by Izberi. The outsourcing process was therefore used to exert direct pressure on the wages of those workers who had managed to retain their jobs. The rates at Izberi were significantly below those at Dnevnik, and thus they received much less for very similar work, while leaving (potentially) unemployed workers with little room for manoeuvre to resist this move. According to the Free Unionist, some workers were receiving up to 60% less at the end of the month than they did at Dnevnik, pointing out that these are “abnormal, terrible numbers”.

Another way of cutting costs was to stop paying deliverers for various material expenses they were entitled to in the past and eliminating several bonuses (paid per quarter, for deputising for someone, for working on weekends or national holidays). The cutbacks included different protective devices, such as boots, bags, gloves and coats that are quickly worn out in poor weather conditions, thus needing to be changed regularly. While newspapers previously used to buy these things for deliverers, in recent times this cost has been completely transferred to them.

### **Control of the labour process**

Newspaper deliverers are relatively autonomous in how they organise their labour process and management's ability to directly supervise the workers is limited. The nature of the work requires intimate knowledge of the area in which a deliverer works. Analysis of the interviews reveals that, while deliverers have a set route they follow daily, they must also be able to significantly adapt their work routine according to changing circumstances in order to deliver newspapers on time, typically by 7 a.m. at the latest. For example, interviewees claimed that delays in printing are not uncommon and sometimes require substantial changes to be made to their usual route. Deliverer2, who delivers in the capital of Slovenia, Ljubljana, claimed he adjusts his route so he can deliver newspapers on time for those customers he knows to be more "bothersome and strict", i.e. more likely to complain about late delivery, with Deliverer6 noting that every day he detours from the most optimal route to deliver newspapers to such subscribers and then returns to his usual route. Deliverer3, who delivers in a rural area, reported even greater changes: she adjusts her route to prioritise towns and specifically bars that wish to have the newspaper already upon opening at 5 a.m., and must also take account of the heavier town traffic when delivering later than usual. The interviewees also reported they sometimes solve problems like missing or damaged newspapers being delivered to them on their own, without the help of their superiors.

To ensure on-time, efficient and reliable newspaper delivery, merely memorising a fixed route is far from enough. Deliverers must have intimate knowledge of their area, know possible alternate routes, their clients' preferences and traffic conditions at different hours to allow them to adjust to various circumstances. Such deep and complex localised knowledge is hard to embody in the form of codified procedures or equipment. Consequently, the interviewees reported that, should it be necessary to train newcomers or replacements in cases of absences from work, this is left up to them. They usually proceed by having the trainee follow them on their route for a period ranging from a couple of days in the case of replacements drawn from the ranks of deliverers who work in neighbouring areas, and up to a few weeks in the case of newcomers:

*First they come with me. I give them a list of places and numbers and they write down themselves what they see. For example, some people know each other, and then they write that down. They don't see the same things as I see. It is better if they write it themselves. They know where the number is and make their own notes. In that way, they will remember it better than if I tell them they should follow this or that list. (Deliverer3)*

Yet this does not mean that the employer is left without any ways to discipline workers. Since it is hard to standardise or otherwise regulate the work process itself, the

employer focuses on controlling the output of the work. First of all, as the interview data show and Izberi's terms and conditions regarding work stipulate, the employer has the power to assign, reassign and alter the areas in which deliverers work. According to Deliverer7, "Everyone always starts with one small area. /.../ And then you get another one. They see that you have been good with your work and they give you another one. You do not start with more." Given, as the interviewees claim, that some areas are significantly better than others in terms of difficulty and financial payoff, this can be a potent way to discipline workers. Where this work is a person's sole or main income source, the threat of being required to work an area with fewer subscribers or lower piece rates can prove to be very powerful.

Further, because deliverers are independent contractors they are forced to not only assume a considerable share of the risks and costs that the employer would otherwise cover, but this also provides the employer with a means to sanction deliverers' poor performance. Since they are paid on a piece-by-piece basis and their final income is then reduced by the number of "reclamations", namely complaints by customers that a newspaper was either not delivered, delivered damaged or too late, it is in their own financial self-interest to perform well. Many of our interviewees found the exact system that regulated their income not to be transparent. This situation further enhances the employer's potential power and control over the workers. As one interviewee emphasised:

*More than half of us do not know how to read the billing sheet. There are just factors and percentages: zero, zero, zero, commas. In most cases, we don't know what it means at all. So we ask each other: what's this, what's that? I don't even bother calling Ljubljana anymore because it just ruins my day and I spend money on the phone. It is useless. (Deliverer5)*

Similarly, Deliverer6 noted he is unable to keep track of how he is paid: "There are so many articles, I haven't checked it [the billing sheet] even once because, I don't know. [...] You know, it's two A4-size sheets, it's like... those items, this and that."

### **Collective bargaining and bargaining position**

Although they work as independent contractors, newspaper deliverers have managed to organise themselves collectively within the Free Trade Union of Slovenia with the help of the now retired long-standing head of distribution of newspapers and canvassers at Dnevnik, "They called me and said that Izberi had informed them that Dnevnik had terminated their contracts. They also asked me to be their representative in the negotiations. I thought the situation through and linked them up with the union. They needed to organise themselves differently because they would be

too weak. /.../ Later I helped them, but I did not participate in the negotiations.” (Former Distribution Head)

The fact that deliverers are highly autonomous in their work routine and are responsible for training new deliverers and replacements potentially puts them in a strong bargaining position because it is not easy to swiftly replace them by hiring new workers nor to make them redundant by introducing new technology or ways of organising the labour process. Outsourcing the delivery activity to the postal service is a possible but not appealing option for the newspaper management due to the increased costs and delivery time: “The worst scenario would be to go to the Post Office. We could go to the postal service every day, but then our subscribers would not receive their newspapers by 7 a.m., only when the postman arrives. In Ljubljana, that would mean around 9 or 10 a.m., in the countryside even up to 3 p.m.” (Distribution Director) At the same time, the Distribution Director says Dnevnik has explicitly demanded that newspapers must be delivered by Izberi even in areas that are not profitable and must not be turned over to the Post Office because every subscriber counts. Since Dnevnik is becoming ever more reliant on subscribers, it is extremely vulnerable to any disruptions in the delivery of the newspaper, a factor Izberi must take into account.

In addition, what potentially increases the deliverers’ power is their relationship with the subscribers. At one extreme, Deliverer6, who delivers in a small town and adjacent rural areas, claimed knowing each of his customers personally, while some others, mainly those working in Ljubljana, reported far less personal contact with their customers. Nonetheless, when deliverers attempted to boycott delivery services when Dnevnik decided to end their contracts and then refused to negotiate, they received strong support from the subscribers. The boycott was announced via a leaflet distributed together with the newspaper in which they explained the reasons for the boycott and asked subscribers to send their support to an email address created specifically for the occasion:

*Please believe that our decision [to boycott distribution] was a difficult one. Dnevnik is also our ‘house’. But what to think of a company that offers you a kick in the ass in exchange for decades of loyalty? That is why we are asking subscribers and the general public not only for their understanding but also for their solidarity and support. (source: Leaflet)*

According to the Free Unionist, over 400 emails arrived within a period of 3 days, of which just two were critical of the boycott: “Many said in no uncertain terms that should this matter not be sorted out they would be cancelling their subscription, even after having been subscribers for more than 10 years, because they have a very personal relationship with deliverers. They acknowledge their hard work and conscientiousness and were really appalled.” As a result, the management of Dnevnik



immediately came to the negotiating table, a sign they realised the threatened boycott could cause serious damage. This postponed the transfer to Izberi by one month. A month later, in April 2014, deliverers again threatened a boycott at Izberi. Yet it was called off because, as the interviewees assert, the organisers believed there was not enough support for it among the deliverers. The most salient explanation given by the interviewees is that the transfer of delivery workers from Dnevnik to Izberi did not affect everyone equally: most deliverers, who were previously working for both Izberi and Dnevnik (according to the interviewees this represented the vast majority of deliverers), were largely experiencing lost income since the tariffs at Izberi were significantly lower. While a smaller share of deliverers who had only been working for Dnevnik lost everything, those working mainly or exclusively for Izberi lost little or even profited by being given the work of the former Dnevnik deliverers. As Deliverer4 claims: “Perhaps they have lost a little or even benefited. These people probably did not have a reason to cooperate with the union, to take part in the strike and thereby undermine the system, because they were not lacking in anything. And I see that as a reason for the insufficient support.”

At the same time, what puts deliverers at a disadvantage are the limited legal possibilities to organise and engage in collective action due to their self-employment status. They cannot legally call a strike and may even be legally liable for financial losses caused by any boycott. The risks of taking action are therefore much greater for them than if they were regularly employed deliverers. The Distribution Director stressed that the deliverers’ supposed planned “seizure” of newspapers would have been “theft”: “It is one thing to not work, but another to prevent others from working. If you take the package and hide it so that someone else cannot deliver it, that is theft.”

The lack of solidarity shown by journalists and other workers at Dnevnik, who are represented by two unions, further weakened the deliverers’ position. The Newspaper Unionist claimed the Dnevnik Journalists’ Union was helpless in terms of engaging in industrial action in solidarity with the deliverers: “This was all the union could do. Now a strike ... they [the owner] would ask, why we are striking: ‘I saved 400,000 and you will be receiving wages because of that. /.../ If there is financial loss due to your strike, you will be held accountable.’” In this context, the Desk Head saw the union’s “letter of protest” to the board as disingenuous:

*Because management had messed some things up in this case, right, [laughs] the journalists’ union or, how should I put it, my socially-conscious colleagues, thought it necessary to feel sorry for the deliverers. But, otherwise, they don’t give a rat’s ass about the deliverers. They have no idea about their working conditions, they were never interested in how much money they make. Nothing.*

When we contacted the president of the Dnevnik Workers' Union, she said we should direct our questions to management instead. However, the Former Distribution Head, who had helped the deliverers organise themselves against the sudden decision on outsourcing, had little sympathy for the lack of solidarity from the two internal unions at Dnevnik. She summed up their lack of activity in the following way: "Assholes! To put it briefly."

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Labour power is a mischievous commodity. While the capitalist acquires the right to use a worker's capacities upon purchasing them for a set period of time, the task of extracting the largest possible amount of (surplus) labour from workers remains. The abstract human capacity to work – labour power – must manifest itself as actually performed labour. To this end, several methods can be employed depending on different factors: the availability of labour, the strength and capacity of labour to resist, the nature of the labour process and the technology used, or competitive pressures. We do not wish to argue against the presence of broader trends, for example the transition from a despotic to a hegemonic production regime and later to hegemonic despotism as described by Burawoy (1985; 2004). Yet we do wish to emphasise the diversity within those broader trends, a focus that can enrich analysis of the labour process.

Our analysis of newspaper delivery labour focuses on an industry in turmoil, where the crisis of the newspaper industry – to borrow a phrase from Gramsci (1971: 276) – "consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born". While digitalisation is contributing to the sharp decline of print circulation, the online revenues of newspapers in Slovenia remain negligible and the printed newspaper is retaining its role of prime revenue source. Paradoxically, at a time when technological upheaval threatens to make newspaper deliverers redundant, they are more important than ever. Delivery labour thus finds itself in a contradictory position: at once redundant and irreplaceable. Management attempts to cut newspaper delivery costs, mainly by reducing the deliverers' income, occur in a context where the newspaper's business activity is extremely vulnerable to any disruptions in the delivery process.

The strategies applied by management to reduce costs and maintain control over delivery workers in this setting are shaped by several factors. The first is that it is hard to exercise direct control over the labour process of newspaper deliverers due to its exact nature. Their work requires context-specific knowledge like knowing the terrain, local traffic conditions, and subscribers' preferences that is hard to encapsulate in the form of protocols and procedures. It is therefore advantageous for the

employer to give “responsible autonomy” to the deliverers (Friedman, 1977), letting them work out for themselves how to accomplish their given tasks and even train new workers and replacements. Management, on the other hand, exercises control by monitoring the output of the delivery workers. Deliverers are paid a piece rate and penalised if newspapers are not delivered, delivered too late or in a damaged state. Not only does this system allow for the disciplining of workers, it also means that a share of the consequences of falling circulation numbers is directly passed on to deliverers as a drop in subscribers immediately translates to lower income. As they are not employed but are formally independent contractors, the employer can also discipline them by reassigning their delivery areas or by reducing the size of their area and hence decreasing their income.

These factors translate into both strengths and vulnerabilities in the process of collective bargaining and struggle. In our case, the deliverers had three main sources of strength: first, the centrality of the delivery activity for the newspaper house’s income because over 90% of newspaper circulation is sold via subscriptions and sold printed newspapers still account for the most important revenue source. Second, the deliverers’ autonomy in how they organise their work and train newcomers and replacements. Finally, the direct contact and personal connections with customers the deliverers have developed. The overall result of these is that the deliverers are in a position where they could virtually shut down sales of the newspaper if they were to collectively organise and boycott its delivery. However, many factors work against deliverers making full use of their power. Their formal independent contractor status not only means they can be laid off without warning or have their workload reduced, but that their individual circumstances can vary significantly. In our case, some deliverers were seriously impacted by the transfer from *Dnevnik* to *Izberi*, while others did not feel any adverse effects or had even benefitted from the change. Individualisation and fragmentation also made collective organising difficult. Unlike the “masses of labourers, crowded into the factory” and “organised as soldiers” (Marx and Engels, 1848/1969) that acquire collective consciousness by suffering a collective fate, the deliverers are dispersed and highly individualised. This circumstance likely contributed to the lack of pre-existing forms of organisation and solidarity among the deliverers, which would have made the collective struggle much easier. Another aspect of fragmentation is that seen between different groups of newswriters, in this case between deliverers and the newsroom workers. It is significant that the deliverers chose to contact their former superior, the retired head of distribution at *Dnevnik*, to help them organise themselves, reflecting the solidarity between workers and management in the area of newspaper delivery that seemed to be lacking between workers in the newsroom and the deliverers.

In this sense, there is a troubling correspondence between the marginality of delivery labour in (even critical) communication research and the marginality of delivery

labour inside news organisations. We have uncovered the lack of solidarity of “white collar newswriters” (McKercher, 2002) in the newsroom with regard to the deliverers’ struggles. While it is impossible to generalise from the case at hand, it seems plausible that the gap between the newsroom and other newswriters created by the professionalisation project has contributed to this lack of solidarity (cf. Hardt, 1996; Nerone, in this issue). As put by the retired head of distribution at Dnevnik who had helped the deliverers organise: “Deliverers were always an important factor, although they were sometimes not recognised as such because the journalistic community always thought of itself as if they are greater than gods.”

These theses point to both an academic and a practical task. The academic task is to move beyond the focus on white-collar newswriters and embrace a more comprehensive definition of newswriting that includes all workers in the news production and distribution chain in today’s changing technological context. A critical examination of the professionalisation project that has strengthened the divisions among newswriters would have to be a crucial element of this task. The practical task facing labour organisers and struggling workers themselves involves building bridges across the divides that the project of professionalisation of journalism has historically helped to create. As digitalisation is disrupting and reshaping news production and distribution, it is at the same time disrupting and reshaping these divisions as well as creating new ones, all of which demand sustained scholarly attention to the labour process in the news industry.

### **Acknowledgement**

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## APPENDIX:

### List of conducted interviews (Slaček Brlek et al., 2014/2017)

Function of the interviewee	Date of interview	Approx. length	In-text reference
Representative of the Association of Free Trade Unions of Slovenia	25 August 2014	1 h 45 min	Free Unionist
Director for Research and Development at Dnevnik, d.d.	27 August 2014	1 h 25 min	Research Director
Head of Desk at the Dnevnik newspaper and project leader for digitalisation	28 August 2014	1 h 5 min	Desk Head
Director of Izberi d.o.o., company currently delivering the Dnevnik newspaper	2 September 2014	1 h 30 min	Distribution Director
Deliverer of the Dnevnik newspaper, self-employed	3 September 2014	1 h 30 min	Deliverer1
Deliverer of the Dnevnik newspaper, self-employed	3 September 2014	1 h 15 min	Deliverer2
Deliverer of the Dnevnik newspaper, self-employed	4 September 2014	1 h 15 min	Deliverer3
Deliverer of the Dnevnik newspaper, self-employed	11 September 2014	1 h 5 min	Deliverer4
Deliverer of the Dnevnik newspaper, self-employed	9 September 2014	1 h 5 min	Deliverer5
President of the Dnevnik Journalists' Union	10 September 2014	1 h	Newspaper Unionist
Deliverer of the Dnevnik newspaper, working under contract	12 September 2014	50 min	Deliverer6
Deliverer of Dnevnik newspaper, self-employed	12 September 2014	1 h	Deliverer7
Long-standing head of distribution of newspapers and of canvassers at Dnevnik, currently retired	16 September 2014	1 h 20 min	Former Distribution Head

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# Studija slučaja rada raznosiča novina kao slijepa točka u političkoj ekonomiji komuniciranja

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## SAŽETAK

*Ovaj članak analizira rad raznosiča novina usredotočujući se na dvije slovenske tvrtke: medijsku kuću Dnevnik i distribucijsku tvrtku Izberi. Kao odgovor na trajni trend smanjenja čitateljstva, Dnevnik je pokušao smanjiti svoje troškove isporuke prenoseći tu aktivnost suparničkoj tvrtki Izberi, što je potez koji je naišao na otpor raznosiča na koje je ta odluka negativno utjecala. Korištenjem metode dubinskih intervjua i analize dokumenata, cilj ovog rada je utvrditi tehnike ekonomske racionalizacije koje su se koristile za smanjenje troškova raznošenja, disciplinu radne snage te kao odgovor na otpor raznosiča novina prema tim tehnikama.*

Ključne riječi: novinarski posao, raznošenje novina, upravljački sustav, kolektivno pregovaranje