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Guest editorial: Constructing the co-operative imaginary: Journalism's past, present, and emerging contributions

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Constructing the Co-operative Imaginary: Journalism's Past, Present, and Emerging Contributions

Mitch Diamantopoulos, Alex Bird, and Andrew Bibby with Siôn Whellens and Rebecca Harvey

This special edition of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* celebrates the sesquicentennial of *Co-op News* (founded as *The Co-operative News* in 1871) by focusing on the co-operative movement's complicated relationship with the media. Against the systemic bias and neglect of the establishment press, challengers such as *Co-op News* have repeatedly arisen. Although this continuing tug-of-war for media power is epochal, multi-faceted, and consequential, it remains under-theorised and under-researched. While this collection can only scratch the surface of this topic, its contributors cast important new light at a moment of unprecedented media-saturation. Indeed, ambient news increasingly pervades our lives. As the "primary sense-making process of modernity" (Hartley, 1996, p. 12), journalism thus largely defines and distorts co-operation in the popular imaginary. Co-operators therefore neglect the evolving and ubiquitous power of the press at their peril.

It is for this reason that this special issue responds to both the news industry's contemporary crisis and to the question of why we should care about co-operative journalism. As the UK *Cairncross Review* reported, news sector shrinkage reflects rapid technological innovation and results in increasingly precarious employment (Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, 2019). Pandemic shocks have since further eroded quality, sustainable journalism. Instead, cost-cutting and debt reduction are the watchwords of the age. However, the implications of this protracted decline reach far beyond the news industry. As Cairncross reported, holding private and public power to account is central to a properly functioning democracy and society. Conversely, journalism's crisis serves as a preface to democratic dysfunction and social breakdown. Moreover, constricting democracy's oxygen supply poses particular menace for co-operation — which is premised on strong democratic governance and values. Nevertheless, as an alternative way to meet members' needs for news or news-work, the crisis of the investors' business model also represents an opportunity for co-operative innovation. The cases of *The Bristol Cable* (est. 2014) and Glasgow's *The Ferret* (est. 2015) are just two recent British successes. Several fascinating case studies of news co-operation — spanning the Canadian province of Québec, France, Greece, Spain, and the U.K. — thus wrap-up this issue on a cautiously optimistic note.

Movement Journalism and Early Co-operation: Entwined Histories

Early British co-operation was intimately bound up with movement journalism. Contributions to this special issue clearly illustrate this fact. Beginning with the Owenist press, Mitch Diamantopoulos demonstrates that press activism both preceded the *Co-operative News* and created the conditions for that venture's success. Applying Gramsci's dictum that "every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas", Diamantopoulos outlines how several waves of dissenting journalism laid co-operation's cultural foundations.

Anthony Webster's review of the early British movement press picks up where Diamantopoulos leaves off, focusing mostly on the *Co-operative News*' legacy. Once a weekly newspaper dominated by English consumer co-operatives, Webster's short paper follows its evolution up to its present forms as a monthly magazine and global news website. Along the way, he addresses the re-launch of *The Co-operator* by Henry Pitman in 1861 and the impetus his controversial views lent toward a movement-owned alternative. Also highlighted are the wider stable of publications launched by the sector, including the important case of *Reynolds News* — the national weekly newspaper purchased by the Co-operative Press in 1929. By including illustrations from various co-operative titles, Webster helps us better glimpse the spirit of the age.

Christopher Olewicz's close reading of the *Sheffield Co-operator*'s agitations from 1922 to 1939 is similarly fascinating. In contrast with the efforts of *Co-operative News* and *Reynolds News* to reach country-wide audiences, this study highlights the importance of a local press. As the Co-operative Party's vehicle, Olewicz shows how this newspaper both countered co-operation's adversaries and promoted its interests and outlook in political debates. Spotlighting the role of the *Sheffield Co-operator* in developing a parliamentary wing thus offers valuable insight into Britain's unique movement-media-state nexus. Olewicz's work also encourages greater attention to movement journalism's role in contesting political power elsewhere.

Taken together, these three contributions serve as important reminders of movement journalism's vital historical importance — in building co-operative identity, movement culture, and development momentum. Focused on early British co-operation, these examples should also encourage future investigations of the role played by the movement press across the wider world of co-operative enterprise. As Webster suggests, the archives of co-operative movement publications offer a 'treasure trove' of material for a new generation of historians.

Establishment Media Coverage: A Story of Neglect and Bias

Contrasting sharply with these reflections on the residual cultural inheritance bequeathed by movement journalism, contributions from Anita Mangan and Anu Puusa and Sanna Saastamoinen focus on the dominant culture today fostered by the investor-owned daily press, and how it informs (and misinforms) public perceptions of co-operation. Mangan's study of co-operatives' coverage across U.K. national newspapers in 2020 finds that co-operatives were virtually invisible. Even when co-operation was mentioned it was not explained; it was associated with 'other' people outside British 'mainstream' society; and co-operation was politicised in a way that capitalist enterprise was not. This paper thus points to the media's enduring importance in the cultural reproduction of the investor-owned firm's hegemony on the one hand and co-operation's marginality on the other. It importantly also underlines the movement's need to break out of this symbolic marginalisation if it is to become more than a marginal player in the British economy. Those considering studies of the press and co-operation elsewhere will find Mangan's work a useful reference.

Puusa and Saastamoinen also analyse co-operation's press coverage. This study considers two daily newspapers' treatment of a Finnish consumer retailer's aggressive price-cutting strategy in 2015. Like Mangan, Puusa and Saastamoinen find a news bias that fails to account for co-operatives' distinctive character. In this case, the press favoured private ownership, competitive values, and profit-maximisation as businesses' primary purpose. The authors urge journalism education reform but note the co-operative federation also framed its actions as a simple 'price war'. Puusa and Saastamoinen's double-edged research thus offers an important reminder that sector communications also need to continually reinforce co-operation's identity.

Co-operative News Innovations: Comparing Contemporary Exemplars

The news about contemporary co-operation's relationship with the press is not all bad, as three case study-based contributions finally illustrate. Anca Voinea compares the U.K.'s *New*

Internationalist (est. 1973), France's *Alternatives Économiques* (est. 1980), and Spain's *Alternativas Económicas* (est. 2013). All multi-stakeholder co-operatives, they pool the resources of news-workers, readers, and often other social economy supporters. A valuable reconnaissance of these influential and long-standing co-operatives, Voinea's findings provide measured encouragement for future sector prospects. The study also makes the case for further research — on these and other news co-operatives.

Similarly, Michael Fefes provides a case study of worker-led news co-operation from Greece. Semi-structured interviews with the editor of daily newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* (*EfSyn* — the *Journalists' Newspaper*) illuminate how news-workers formed this 'phoenix co-operative' from the ashes of *Eleftherotypia* (Free Press). This innovation saved members' jobs, sustained journalistic quality, and — like the *New Internationalist*, *Alternatives Économique*, and *Alternativas Económicas* — preserved an independent and progressive editorial voice. The additional fact that *EfSyn* emerged from the context of business failure, Greece's protracted economic crisis, and the pandemic shocks that followed makes this case a uniquely important addition to this collection. Born of crisis, *EfSyn* did not benefit from a period of relative stability to build-up its reserves or resilience. Like Argentina newsrooms also recuperated by their workers, *EfSyn*'s decade of sustained publication thus offers important hope to insecure news-workers elsewhere.

Étienne Fouquet, Myriam Michaud, Luc Audebrand and Claude-André Guilloffe offer a similar case of collective resilience in the face of profound crisis from the Canadian province of Québec — a contemporary world leader in social economy and co-operative innovations. Their article presents the case of CN2i, a co-operative regional media group that — like *EfSyn* — is a 'phoenix co-op'. Launched on the eve of the global pandemic, it emerged from the bankruptcy of an investor-owned group of six regional dailies. Paradoxically, the added complexity posed by simultaneously converting a group of newspapers created new opportunities for creative resource mobilisation. In this case, each publication was reorganised as a multi-stakeholder co-operative to enlist audience support. Central services for the group were also centralised as a second-tier co-operative, held by the member co-operatives. This expertly facilitated conversion both reflects the unique supports afforded by Québec's co-operative development system and offers a valuable model for worker-led conversions elsewhere in this period of protracted crisis for the news industry. This team's research findings are a must-read, both for practitioners and students of news co-operation.

While these cases' unique circumstances limit generalisation, such co-operative media alternatives illustrate that news-workers, their audience-communities, and social economy allies are already playing important roles in re-inventing journalism for the 21st century. However, this emerging sector faces strong economic and industry headwinds — without investors' deep pockets. There is thus no guarantee of their continued success. Nevertheless, these cases also suggest a movement long neglected and misrepresented by establishment journalism can regenerate itself by meeting communities' pressing need for quality, independent news. While no time for foolhardy ventures in this destabilised sector, the historical moment does call out for further research on successful innovations, instructive setbacks, and sector expansion opportunities. Certainly, inattention implies opportunity costs. Moreover, failing to support such efforts may even reinforce regressive tendencies inside and outside co-operation — as democratic values are increasingly threatened by misinformation and an unchecked authoritarian populism. Against such a toxic brew of conspiracy theories, reaction, racism, and xenophobia, one thing is clear: journalists' democratic mission to seek the truth and empower the public remains a vital resource for a more equitable, sustainable, and co-operative future.

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Guest Editors

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The editors would like to thank Siôn Whellans and Rebecca Harvey for their input into the development of this special issue. Siôn joined Calverts – a worker-owned creative design studio and print shop, in 1985. He also serves as a member of CECOP, the European confederation of industrial and service co-operatives. Rebecca is executive editor of *Co-operative News*, having joined the *News* as deputy editor in 2013. She is the fifteenth named executive editor (appointed in 2018) in the organisation's 150 year history and only the second woman to hold the most senior post.