# Representing Labour: Mass Media's Portrayal of Amazon Warehouse Workers during COVID-19

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# Abstract

Since COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic questions of labour have been brought to the forefront of local, national, and international conversations in relatively new ways marking a potential shift away from the dominant neoliberal consensus. A consensus normally concerned with issues concerning capital rather than issues concerning labour. This recent emphasis on labour has been reflected in the news media across the United States where questions regarding workers working conditions and workplace safety and health risks have been raised and discussed. Yet, the dominant media has often maintained an antagonistic and fraught relationship with labour since the inception of the labour movement in the United States. With the ongoing neoliberal restructuring of the news industry since the 1960s, this antagonistic relationship between the dominant media and labour has only been intensified, leading to coverage of labour and issues pertaining to labour being further disregarded or marginalized by the dominant press in the United States. Focusing specifically on the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers' labour unrest under COVID-19, this thesis examines the re-inclusion of workers in American newspapers of record, including the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* and the *Wall Street Journal*. By examining whether and how the framing of labour in these newspapers of record have shifted in the March 2020 to November 2020 period, this thesis explores how these newspapers of record reflect and refract a potential hegemonic rupture building throughout American society; and concludes that the dominant media's tendency to marginalize workers and budding labour movements suggests the need to de-marketize the news media in order to change how the dominant media frames labour.

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## Introduction

"Nobody is thinking "oh what happens if I am going to get the [COVID-19] virus." Everyone is thinking about what they are going to do when they get it and just managing that difficulty," professes William Stolz, an Amazon warehouse worker in Shakopee, Minnesota (Pottenger, 2020, p. 109). With the onset of the global pandemic, COVID-19, where thousands of businesses have shuttered their doors, droves of workers have been laid off, and millions of people globally have lost their lives, lower-income workers have been forced to choose between financial devastation or risking their health as well as their families' well-being by continuing to show up for work. To obfuscate this perilous decision, low-income and front-line workers were quickly labeled essential workers; meaning, their roles and duties were considered necessary in order to keep economies afloat and the virus at bay. As restrictions were imposed on populations limiting their movement and access to public and private spaces, warehouse workers, grocery store clerks, nurses, as well as others were deemed vital for the safety of all.

Yet, "workers quickly realized that 'essential' actually meant 'expendable' or 'sacrificial,' particularly for workers with fewer choices, less financial security, and scant worker protections" (Davis-Faulkner & Sneiderman, 2020, p. 84). In the United States, as COVID-19 spread and cases began to rise, workplaces became increasingly unsafe while transnational corporations accrued unprecedented amounts of profit. With the sudden and widespread transition from in-person to at-home work coupled with the classification of previously overlooked workers as "essential," the working conditions of labourers who continued maintaining supply chains despite the mounting risks became starkly visible. Consequently, labour protests, strikes, and worker unrest erupted across the country. As Joseph McCartin (2020) writes for *Dissent*

*Magazine*, the impact of COVID-19 "is likely to reveal with deeper clarity than we have seen in a long time the class lines that divide our society and the true costs of decades of deepening inequality."

Since the advent of COVID-19, questions concerning class and labour have re-emerged in local, national, and international conversations in relatively new ways, with terms such as coronavirus capitalism coming to the fore (Klein, 2020). Coronavirus capitalism, an offshoot of disaster capitalism, highlights the ways in which private corporations, with the assistance of government agencies, attempt to profit off emerging crises (such as COVID-19), by exploiting novel precarious conditions (Klein, 2008, 2020). Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, corporate behemoths, such as Amazon, have not only cemented their monopolistic position but have expanded their totalizing grip. With the instatement of stay-at-home measures followed by the subsequent closure of brick-and-mortar retail stores, Amazon emerged as a pseudo-utility capturing the purchasing needs of millions of Americans plus millions more abroad. Fearful of venturing outdoors, millions of people turned to Amazon to fulfill the majority of their shopping needs. This sudden spike in online orders, ranging from everyday grocery items, such as margarine, soap, and spices, to gym equipment, children's toys, and even clothing, solidified Amazon's role as the leading retailer by a wide margin. In the first few months of the COVID-19 crisis, Jeff Bezos, Amazon's former CEO and founder, amassed $24 billion in wealth alone (Huws, 2020).

Amazon warehouse workers faced heightened pressures to fulfill this abrupt surge in orders despite the ceaseless transmission of the COVID-19 virus. As Amazon worked to secure this boom in sales, Amazon warehouse workers laboured tirelessly to catch up and maintain the

additional workload. Amazon's fulfillment centers, which house the commodities sold on their e-commerce platform, are at the heart of Amazon's global production processes with Amazon currently owning and operating hundreds of fulfillment centers globally (Delfanti, 2019). The brutality of the working conditions in Amazon's fulfillment centers have been documented by multiple news organizations where workers are known to skip out on bathroom breaks, lunches, and often fall ill or injure themselves on the job in order to avoid termination or punishment (Manokha, 2019). With the looming threat of instantaneous punishment or termination Amazon workers are forced to comply with outwardly determined and constantly changing productivity rates and goals (Manokha, 2019). Faced with the double threat from highly surveilled, controlled, and ruthlessly disciplined work routines as well as the additional health risks imposed by COVID-19, several Amazon fulfillment center workers came forward about their grueling working conditions as well as Amazon's failure to recalibrate their fulfilment centers in an attempt to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

As essential workers continued speaking out about the hazardous working conditions they are forced to endure, mass media increased coverage of their stories which raised the profile of labour-related news in both alternative and mainstream journalism. In particular, American mass media's intensified coverage of labour centred on questions regarding workers' working conditions and workplace safety and health risks. This heightened coverage of labour unrest and issues concerning labour during COVID-19 represents a possible shift away (although, perhaps, only temporarily) from the dominant neoliberal consensus which has come to define and orient news coverage over the past forty years. This thesis, then, examines the re-inclusion of workers in American newspapers of record, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, as well as the *Wall Street Journal*, focusing specifically on the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers

produced between August 19, 2019 until November 5, 2020 in order to assess whether this coverage might represent a deeper shift in media discourses or a more temporary interest on the part of news outlets. As Diana Kendall writes in *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America* (2011), "by analyzing how the media socially construct meanings about class, we can more clearly see how ideology and everything that passes for knowledge in our society can affect our thinking about inequality and our personal identity in regard to the class structure" (p. 6).

Several academics, activists, and labour organizers have illustrated how the media, particularly the news media, "overrepresent the interests of elites" (Kumar, 2001; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; McChesney, 1997, Entman, 1989, Winter, 1997) when representing labour issues; leading to several journalists, scholars, and activists decrying the news media's consistent under-reporting of labour (Erickson & Mitchell, 1996, Gitlin, 2003). Soon after the inception of the labour movement in the early to mid nineteenth century, news coverage grew increasingly hostile in their coverage of workers and labour struggles. Louis Stark (1942) remarks that "in the early eighties (1800s) the movement for the eight-hour [work] day was ridiculed by the press, and even though some states passed laws limiting working hours to eight, these were nullified by contracts permitting longer hours" (p. 107). Similarly, Walter Lipmann in 1922 wrote, "if you study the way many a strike is reported in the press, you will find, very often, that the issues are rarely in the headlines, barely in the leading paragraphs, and sometimes not even mentioned anywhere" (p. 350). Following this tendency, during the Great Depression, as the labour movement attracted more and more workers and played a more integral role in the lives of everyday Americans, coverage of the labour movement nevertheless grew more antagonistic. As Diana Kendall (2011) notes, "during the 1920s and 1930s, media representations of workers and

the labour movement grew more negative; not only was the violence continuing, but (in the latter decade) political leaders placed blame for the nation's industrial depression and high unemployment rates on organized labour and its leaders" (p. 128).

News coverage of workers and the labour movement seemed to pick up steam after the introduction of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933 which temporarily established a short-lived public works program in an attempt to alleviate the economic devastation caused by the Great Depression; as well as with the codification of the Wagner Act in 1935, which legalized the right of employees to organize (Kendall, 2011). Through these pieces of legislation, newspapers were prompted to further develop a labour beat encouraging journalists to dig deeper into labour issues providing "more serious interpretations of the aims of labour and its views and policies" (Stark, 1942, p. 110). As Kumar (2001) observes, in the "1930s and 1940s a full-time labour editor or beat reporter was the norm among newspapers with medium to large circulation" (p. 286). Yet, despite these victories for workers and the labour movement, as noted above, coverage of workers, while more substantial than in existing decades, nonetheless maintained an anti-worker bias.

Moreover, from the 1960s onwards, coverage of workers and the labour movement plummeted significantly in the United States as neoliberalist policies began to emerge eventually defining and directing the ongoing economic restructuring of the news industry (Basu, 2018). Briefly, neoliberalism is defined as "a philosophy viewing market exchange as a guide for all human action," where "human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets" (Dean, 2009, p. 51). Neoliberalism, then, can be understood as an aspiring totalizing capitalist ideology, where, ideally, all aspects, functions, and spheres of life are absorbed and privatized by the logic

of the market. With the ascension of neoliberalism, followed by an all-out assault on the labour movement by the state as well as corporations (which invariably led to the subsequent decline of labour movements in the United States), anti-labour trends in news coverage have only been amplified. As a result, workers and issues pertaining to labour have either been disregarded or further marginalized in the news (Martin, 2019; Puette, 1992).

By the 1970s, as Christopher Martin (2019) attests, a rather noticeable shift occurred in news reporting about strikes where the focus of articles almost always fixated on the grievances of consumers who were irritated by the unions and workers disrupting the routines of their everyday lives. Martin argues that this shift in reporting is attributable to the reduction of labour beat reporters across newspapers in the United States as a result of the changing financial structures of newspapers themselves. This financial structural change has subsequently led to newspapers adopting a more 'upscale' consumer audience despite the working class previously comprising a substantial portion of many newspaper subscribers. Martin (2019) notes, "instead of being "with" the workers the newspaper narratives began to go "against" the workers because they inflicted inflationary damage and inconveniences on the newspapers' new upscale consumers" (p. 18). According to Martin, by adopting this newfound upscale audience, newspapers shifted away from reporting on or about labour and instead began focusing their reporting on office workplace lifestyle stories.

However, while Martin's focus on newspapers adopting upscale audiences as the explanation for the further deterioration of labour reporting bears a kernel of truth, it falls short of explaining the historically fraught relationship between labour and the media's persistently antagonistic representations of labourers and the labour movement. Not only did newspapers shift their focus

to upscale audiences as newspaper companies became publicly traded companies, but several newspapers became immersed in "transnational corporate empires, with shrunken resources and even less management enthusiasm for investigative journalism that would challenge the structure of power" (Herman, 2018, p. 51). Both the shrinkage of the labour movement and the incorporation of newspapers into major corporations has precipitated the erasure of labour considerations in newsrooms across the country. As the former *Los Angeles Times* labour beat reporter Bob Barker said in the early 1990s, "this is bigger than one paper or one beat. There's clearly some discomfort at the notion of covering something from the worker's point of view or any individual point of view. This is what's happening to big city journalism; a lot of papers that a generation ago might have been proud to cover society from the bottom up are today much more cautious… The business… is run by people who are comfortable with the top-down, institutional view of the world" (Mort, 1992, p. 82).

Robert McChesney (2011, 2015), who has assiduously reported on and analyzed the weakening of journalism over the past several decades, issued warnings about the effects of commercial news media systems on the quality of journalism in the United States. In 2001 influential journalists and researchers remarked, "newspapers are increasingly a reflection of what the advertisers tell the newspapers some of us want, which is what the financial markets tell the newspapers what they want" (Cranberg, Bezanson, & Soloski, 2001). This has led, as Chakravartty and Schiller (2010) found, to a structural transformation of the news industry towards markets and financial developments whereby news coverage prioritized information stemming from pro-business communities, including state officials as well as sources working in the financial sector at the expense of labour representatives or other community members.

The impact of the processes of neoliberalism on the news industry has resulted in multiple alarming repercussions with caustic effects on the production and quality of contemporary news. First, the death of the labour beat rampaged across the United States with only five of the top twenty-five newspapers in the United States employing full-time labour reporters in 2018 (Martin, 2019). Secondly, workplace stories migrated to the business section of the newspaper suggesting a totalizing embeddedness between labour and capital as represented by corporations and the financial sector. And lastly, as Laura Basu (2018) suggests, the "concentration of ownership and depletion of resources means that journalism is less likely to hold the powerful to account, investigate issues thoroughly or seek out a range of perspectives. Journalism is therefore perhaps more likely to fulfil a hegemonic role, legitimizing existing social relations by presenting dominant ideas as 'common sense'" (p. 27).

Basu's argument corroborates Todd Gitlin's (2003) observations in his book *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, where he states, "just as the networks must be careful not to offend core interests of the state, so they must take care not to violate the most central premises of the business system as a whole: they must sanction the right of private control over investment and production, just as they sanctify their own right to control the space within which public communications take place" (p.282). Both the mass media's capitalistic orientation and their subsequent role of upholding, disseminating, and normalising dominant ideological positions further serves to undermine and/or disregard labourers and issues concerning labour in the mass media's news coverage. From this perspective, this thesis explores whether the recent coverage of Amazon warehouse workers during COVID-19 fits within the fraught and antagonistic relationship between the news media and workers.

Several questions arise from the aforementioned considerations including: how were Amazon warehouse workers framed by the media during COVID-19? How does the current news coverage of Amazon warehouse workers fit within historical representations of labour? What does this coverage suggest in terms of how labour is valued and understood today?

While researchers and scholars are analyzing the health impacts of COVID-19 on domestic and international populations, this thesis contextualizes the news media's portrayal of labour with the economic effects brought on by COVID-19's disruption of globalized supply chains and the subsequent slowing down of capitalist markets in the United States (Bellamy-Foster, 2020). As Amazon warehouse workers have been at the forefront of both discussing and organising strikes since the advent of COVID-19, it is important to contextualize contemporary news coverage of striking workers with these kinds of historical representations, including considering whether contemporary representations diverge from older narratives. Importantly, Amazon's warehouse workers are often overlooked by both scholars and the mass media. Through this research I hope to bring attention to the neglect and/or underrepresentation of labourers in both fields. Given the rapidly expanding income disparity prevalent around the world and the subsequent depreciating power of labourers, it is increasingly necessary and important to examine how certain representations of class have dominated news discourse and what the ramifications of these portrayals are. This thesis addresses these concerns.

This thesis begins with a substantive discussion regarding the theoretical contexts which informs the production of the news. As such, chapter one explores the ideological positioning and economic embeddedness of the dominant media with capitalist corporations. This chapter addresses how the ownership and corporate structure of contemporary media companies affects

how the media acts and behaves when confronted with growing opposition challenging the media's ideological presuppositions and hegemonic role. While these newspapers of record do not have totalizing control over the production and dissemination of news, their role nonetheless is setting the initial frames for a story which subsequent stories are often obligated to refer back to. However, it is important to point out that this feedback loop is far from closed. This chapter then engages in an elucidation of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony which is followed by an exploration of hegemony's relationship to the news media, the origins of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, the multiple variations of hegemony itself, and finally, this chapter addresses the relationship between hegemony and representation. Ultimately this chapter asks: based on the anti-labour bias frequently found throughout the historical and contemporary coverage of labour by these newspapers of record, are these news outlets adequate sites to challenge, or attempt to challenge, hegemonic ideals?

Chapter two describes the methodological approach of this thesis which situates the analysis of the news coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. I describe the reasoning behind selecting framing analysis for this thesis, why framing analysis is a fruitful way of critically approaching news coverage, as well as discuss the research questions guiding this thesis. I then expound on the role of news values in the production of the news, how these institutionalized and professionalized values shape news coverage, including the framing of labour in the dominant media's coverage. Alongside news values, I elaborate on another important characteristic shaping news production: the media's reliance on 'primary' definers to help frame and direct their stories. Briefly, primary definers are normally official sources including politicians and businesspeople. This chapter concludes with a description of the newspapers of

record that generated the material for this research, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Chapter three is concerned with these publications' coverage of Amazon warehouse workers throughout the duration of COVID-19. This chapter is divided into four distinct, yet occasionally overlapping phases of coverage found throughout my research. The first phase, zombie reporting, captures the initial period of coverage of Amazon warehouse workers' unrest. Here, the newspapers of record rely on Amazon corporate spokespeople and institutionalized news values to frame their stories. The second phase, the moment of discovery, points to a shift in coverage inspired by two events, the firing of Amazon warehouse worker, Christian Smalls, as well as a leaked memo documenting Amazon's corporate public relations strategy concerning the growing labour unrest found within Amazon facilities. The third phase, "Amazon as painful but necessary", details the featured publications' attempt to dilute and contain the burgeoning labour actions at Amazon warehouses by resorting to using Amazon's corporate representatives to frame their stories. The final phase, "workers protest as hazy memory", covers the dwindling interest the publications' had in Amazon warehouse workers' labour unrest in which their strikes, protests, and other labour actions slip into the background.

Chapter four compares and contrasts the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*'s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with their pre-pandemic reporting. Throughout the chapter, I illustrate how these newspapers of record actively disremembered their own pre-pandemic reporting through the process of what independent scholar, Laura Basu, refers to as media amnesia. The process of media amnesia subsequently led to a narrowing of perspectives and criticisms waged against Amazon

throughout COVID-19. This chapter also reflects upon the pertinent details missing throughout the majority of the coverage of Amazon and Amazon warehouse workers that was produced by these newspapers of record both before and during COVID-19.

Finally, in the conclusion I reiterate the research questions directing this thesis. In particular, I assert that while a shift away from neoliberalism may exist on the ground in American society, where the value of labour is changing, this change is infrequently reflected in the newspapers of record coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. I then compare and contrast the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest with historical representations of labour, asking what these differences and similarities mean in the context of labour's contemporary and fluctuating role in society. By reflecting on the continuity of anti-labour bias in the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers, this conclusion considers the necessity of de-marketizing the news media as a solution to the dominant media's anti-labour trajectory.

## Chapter I: Hegemony, Representation, and the Production of the News

In 1845 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in *The German Ideology, "*the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of its ruling class" (p. 26). Here, Marx and Engels contend that the classes who control, dictate, and direct the material forces of society concurrently rule the prevailing intellectual forces as well. Stuart Hall (1982) elaborates on this claim, stating "Marx's contention is that this dominance of 'ruling ideas' operates primarily because, in addition to its ownership and control of the means of material production, this class also owns and controls the means of 'mental production'. In producing their definition of social reality, and the place of 'ordinary people' within it, they construct a particular image of society which represents particular class interests as the interests of all members of society…" (p. 59).

Despite the contentiousness of both Marx and Hall's claims, which have elicited several scholarly debates about the relationship between what's referred to as the base (which includes the forces of production in a given society) and the superstructure (which includes the myriad of cultural apparatuses and institutions of a given society), when it comes to the production of the news, Marx, Engels, and Hall's analyses touch upon the integral relationship between the state, corporations, and the media. Although Marx, Engels, and Hall are reflecting broadly on the production, circulation, and acceptance of ideas within a capitalist society, with Marx and Engels speaking about a historical period in which mass media industries had yet to develop, I seek to elucidate their point explicitly and materially with a quick example of how contemporary media companies are intimately tethered to and are in confluence with additional dominant capitalistic enterprises within the United States. My objective with this example is to illustrate the mutual interest between different economic forces within the United States in contributing to and

shaping the orientation of news companies. So, for example, the board of directors of the New York Times Company, the company who publishes *The New York Times*, constructs an adequate image of the various components of the economic blocs both vying for power and working to maintain their positions within the United States. The New York Times Company's board of directors includes three representatives of major internet companies, including the CEO of GoDaddy, a domain registerer and web hosting company, the CFO of Etsy, a major e-commerce platform, as well as the CMO (Chief Marketing Officer) of Oculus, which is a subsidiary of Facebook. The board also includes a representative of a major telecommunications company, Verizon, a representative of a former investment bank, Salomon Brothers, which was acquired by Citigroup in 1999, as well as a representative of AIG, the American International Group, which is a multinational finance and insurance corporation that received bailout money from the United States government during the 2008 financial crisis. Perhaps the only corporate representatives missing from the New York Times Company's board are oil, gas, and defense contractors; or, perhaps, this division of corporate influence and interests illustrates a rift in the competing economic blocs dominant in American society.

This mosaic of corporate interests illuminates that while the ruling class(es) may not assert overt and totalizing control over media production, they are, nonetheless, embedded within these media corporations. With the restructuring of news organizations in the 1960s onwards, corporate influence on the news has become more pronounced, in part due to their ability to influence the strategic orientation of media companies. As Edward Herman (2018) notes, "the crucial structural factors derive from the fact that the dominant media are firmly embedded in the market system. They are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people (or other companies); they are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who

want their ads to appear in a supportive selling environment " (p. 45). However, similar to Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman (1988) in their analysis of how the media functions in their pinnacle text, *Manufacturing Consent,* it is important to remember that when discussing the relationship between corporations, the state, and the media, I am referring to how the media behaves and performs rather than the effects produced by the media and media coverage. While there may be discrepancies in how audiences respond to the media's coverage about specific events, it is important, however, to note how the media functions and what the meanings are both subtle and obvious behind their coverage.

The integral relationship between corporations and the news media is demonstrably acute in Daniel Chomsky's historical study of memos sent from Arthur Hays Sulzberger, the former publisher and owner of the *New York Times,* to the editor of the *New York Times* from 1956 to 1962. Chomsky's findings illustrate the interventionist role Sulzberger played when stories concerning labour were being considered by the *New York Times* news team. As Chomsky writes, "the owner's requests… consistently favored the concerns of the wealthy over those of ordinary citizens… Sulzberger never suggested a single story dealing with ordinary workers. Unions entered Sulzberger's consciousness and his blue notes only as a threat to society" (2006, p. 11). Although this is a historical observation made just prior to the economic restructuring of news companies in the 1960s which opened the gate for future neoliberalist policies, it nevertheless illustrates how the owners of media companies and perhaps the set of people who influence the owner's (i.e. the board and major shareholders) can and often do influence the orientation of news coverage about labour. This thesis, then, is concerned with how the media acts and responds to emergent labour movements rather than how audiences react, absorb, or respond to the media's coverage.

Yet, outside of this direct example of the relationship between capitalism and media production, let us return to Hall's original claim that the ruling class(es) assist in assembling specific images of society without direct control over the production of the news. One of the undergirding reasons why the media, especially dominant media, including newspapers of record, play an important role in shaping images of society is the fact that the media are more often than not the primary sources of information about phenomena and events occurring locally, nationally, and globally which are widely accessible to people as the events covered are unfolding (Hall, 1982). The media, then, act as translators where they are accredited with initially framing ongoing stories which carry the capacity to influence people's perceptions and opinions of the world. This process is referred to as media framing where the media are tasked with defining what important events are currently occurring, and more importantly, they "offer powerful interpretations of *how* to understand these events" (emphasis added in original text) (Hall, 1982, p. 57). This is precisely why Diana Kendall (2011) remarks, "we must consider class as the media frame it, especially in television entertainment programs and national newspapers, in its own right as a form of reality construction and maintenance" (p. 3). The media's ability to construct and maintain perceived images of "reality" is particularly alarming considering Robert McChesney's assertions in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*. McChesney (2015) states that within the last century as the media continued gaining prominence and social power, they increasingly became an integral component to the functioning of contemporary capitalism.

Furthermore, media scholar, Todd Gitlin (2003), asserts,

> Of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness – by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity. They name the world's parts, they certify reality as reality – and when their certifications are doubted and opposed, as they surely are, it is those same

> certifications that limit the terms of effective opposition. To put it simply: the mass media have become core systems for the distribution of ideology (p. 3-4).

The point Gitlin is making here is that although the media cannot assert totalizing control over how people perceive and understand the world in which they live they nonetheless contribute to setting dominant frames about ongoing phenomena and events within which all discourses, including alternative narratives, must refer back to. These frames are typically reiterated by other leading and dominant institutions, including government and state representatives and policy makers, corporations, think tanks, etc., as well.

Richard Butsch (2003) corroborates and expands on Gitlin's claims in his essay "A Half Century of Class and Gender in American TV Domestic Sitcoms," stipulating that the power of imagery lies in both its pervasiveness and perpetuation. Through repetition and ubiquity, images transmogrify into cultural types, tropes, or stereotypes within mainstream culture in which most additional images, whether they are exceptions, alternatives, or even oppositional must refer back to, either through rejection, negation, or critique (Butsch, 2003). For example, since the inception of the labour movement in the early eighteenth century in the United States, workers and unions have regularly been framed as greedy, lazy, or corrupt by various forms of media, including newspapers, pamphlets, tv shows, and films (Kendall, 2011). Newspapers, in particular, have persistently and continuously represented workers and unions as greedy and inconsiderate, where workers interests are positioned as diametrically opposed and antagonistic to the average 'consumer-citizen' (Kendall, 2011; Martin, 2019; Kumar, 2001; Puette, 1992). Unions and workers are often portrayed as inconveniencing ordinary people by stopping production in order to strike. This greedy/lazy frame has followed labour, reproduced time and time again, for over a century. In an issue of *International Molder's Journal* in 1922, the

following statement was written: “grasping this fine opportunity for news the big dailies get busy and start to lash the strikes through blatant columns of their unreliable news sheets for the inconveniencing and suffering they have brought upon the public” (O’Keefe, p. 23). This frame has followed workers and labour movements, where labour has been forced to consistently contend with, disprove, or challenge these commonly and frequently made accusations. The effects of how the media frame class and labour, as Kendall argues, “has a major impact on how people feel about class and inequality” (2011, p. 2). This thesis, then, considers how the media frames class, workers, and emergent labour movements in the service of prevailing ideologies.

Following Graham Knight and Tony Dean (1982) in their paper, “Myth and the Structure of News,” I consider ideology to be “more than simply a stratification of meanings… Ideology ‘works’ hegemonically to legitimize and universalize as common sense the interests, perspectives, and practices of the dominant, such that alternatives challenging these dominant views tend to be expelled from normal reality as dangerous, bizarre, comical, and so on” (p. 145). As Frederic Jameson (1981) attests, ideologies act as systems of beliefs and ideas which filter our perceptions of reality. The dominant media then act as both participants in constructing images of reality which frequently align with hegemonic ideological filters as well as distribution channels for these ideological filters to become dominant. Here, it becomes easy to see why Antonio Gramsci, while imprisoned under Mussolini’s fascist regime in the 1930s, wrote that the press is the most dynamic and prominent part of the ideological structure of a dominant class, and subsequently referred to the press as developing the theoretical or ideological front for the capitalist state. For Gramsci, cultural institutions, such as the press, are central to mobilizing and maintaining hegemonic blocs which attempt to “naturalize" certain conceptions of reality in favour of the dominant structures of a given society (2012).

This chapter, though, is primarily concerned with elaborating on the relationship between the Gramscian notion of hegemony and news production. With the sudden emergence of the COVID-19 crisis illuminating growing economic, social, and political fissures within the United States, this chapter lays the foundations for what I mean when I discuss a possible hegemonic rupture where previously overlooked issues, such as labour, have risen to the fore. Crisis, according to Walter Benjamin (1999), is a result of experiences being concurrently negated and transformed by the social contradictions prevalent at a given time within a given society. Occasionally, moments of crises both expose and unmask hegemonic alliances which carry the capacity to overtly challenge or, in some cases, overhaul prevailing hegemonic orders.

Yet, as Raymond Williams (1997) remarks in his essay "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," hegemony "does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressure not at all its own… [I]t is never either total or exclusive… [A]ny hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance" (p. 135). This suggests that although hegemony is always already in the process of being challenged or altered by different oppositional currents and trends, opposition, or even crisis itself, may not upend hegemony. For example, despite capital making several concessions to labour after World War Two, arguably shifting the composition of hegemony in the United States, the form of capitalism may have been modified but capitalism itself nonetheless maintained its dominance. Moreover, despite frequent challenges to hegemony, the challenges themselves do not presuppose major shifts in hegemonic blocs. While the interests of hegemony are constantly being questioned or confronted in various ways, this does not suggest that the challenges themselves pose an overarching threat to an

existing hegemonic order. Although the actors representing the components of hegemonic blocs may occasionally change, the interests keeping these blocs together may continue upholding the fundamental beliefs and values of previous hegemonic arrangements. William's point, I suggest, is to question the purported dominance of any given hegemonic order; like all things, it is subject to change. However, it is important to note that the changes to a given hegemonic order *may not* fundamentally alter the core values of pre-existing hegemonic blocs. In fact, Williams highlights how hegemony itself must be kept abreast of potential challengers, in part so it can adapt and change without potentially collapsing its own credibility and validity. This brings me to the second consideration of this chapter. This chapter is analyzing/assessing whether and to what extent we are in a moment where the hegemonic order is shifting, but it does so by examining established news organizations which, as discussed throughout the chapter, are central to the maintenance of that order. Given the role of newspapers of record the question is not primarily whether they themselves present counter-hegemonic positions, but rather the extent to which oppositional ideas appear at all, and the kind of ideological work the newspaper performs in order to shore up the hegemonic order. From this perspective, I am assessing how hegemonic institutions are contending with palpable schisms in American society and what their coverage and representations of Amazon warehouse workers during COVID-19 tells us about how hegemonic institutions respond to rising opposition.

*Hegemony & the News*

Before delving into a brief history of the term hegemony and its various meanings, let us initially discuss how the media naturalizes certain conceptions, representations, and images of the world thereby producing 'common sense' and hegemonic narratives which ultimately influence how

people make sense of what is happening around them. First, however, I will provide a simple explanation of what the Gramscian definition of hegemony is. As this chapter proceeds, I will be expanding upon this basic interpretation.

The Gramscian notion of hegemony is commonly understood as the process in which consent is silently given by the majority of the people within an existing social order (Gramsci, 1971). Consent is achieved by the proliferation of certain ideologies which eventually become dominant. Through the dominance of a set of given ideas, the ideas themselves appear 'naturalized,' where they emerge as common-sense narratives. As mentioned above, ideologies can, and often do, work in the service of specific social groups. Yet, ideologies which become dominant are in a consistent struggle to remain dominant. They are constantly in the process of being challenged and negotiated, where the possibility of displacement, usurpation, or even replacement by competing ideas hovers closely existing within hegemony's shadow. As Gramsci (2012) states, "every social class has its own 'common sense' and 'good sense'… Common sense is not something rigid and stationary, but is in continuous transformation, becoming enriched with scientific notions and philosophical opinions that have entered into common circulation" (p. 421).

One of the ways in which the news media (re)asserts hegemonic narratives is by sheerly being the leading site in which dominant ideas are both assiduously challenged and reproduced (Basu, 2018). Michael Parenti (1986) notes, "even when we don't believe what the media say, we are still hearing or reading their viewpoints rather than some others. They are still setting the agenda, defining what it is we must believe or disbelieve, accept, or reject. The media exert a subtle, persistent influence in defining the scope of respectable political discourse, channelling public

attention in directions that are essentially supportive of the existing politico-economic system" (p. ix). Through chronic exposure to the frames, ideas, narratives, and even rebuttals, the persistency of the news media is in part one of the reasons why it plays an integral role in the process of solidifying and maintaining hegemony. This is why Raymond Williams refers to hegemony as "deeply saturating the consciousness of a society" (1997, p. 135).

The pervasiveness of the news media enables another process wherein the news develops, secures, and ferments, hegemonic narratives. This includes the process in which the news is generally produced. The news is shaped and produced through standardized assumptions regarding both what events constitute as news as well as how news stories themselves are written and produced. More precisely, hegemony is located within what is considered to be "credible," "important," or "objective" news. As Hall writes, "objectivity, like impartiality, is an operational fiction" (1974, p. 23). Or as Gitlin states, "these elusive categories are neither arbitrary nor fixed" (2003, p. 269).

Objectivity and impartiality, within the realm of news, are understood as the guiding ideals providing a balanced story where both sides of the story are not only heard but each side's claims ostensibly bear equal weight. But, as Hall observes, "impartiality has several inescapable consequences. It leads… to the impasse of a false symmetry of issues. Responsibility is shared between the parties; each side receives a measure of praise or censure. This symmetry of oppositions is a formal balance: it has little or no relevance to the quite unequal relative weights of the case for each side in the real world" (1974, p. 22). For example, when covering labour, particularly when covering strikes, the journalistic standard of news reporting means including the perspectives of both the striking workers (which is normally vocalized through a union

representative) as well as managers or public relations representatives of the company in question where journalist often write as if each side's claims and reasonings are equally valid (Parenti, 1986; Puette, 1992; Kumar, 2001). This balancing of sources typically results in, as Deepa Kumar (2001) notes, the omission of vital information that could provide an alternative framing for the story. More often than not, through the "balancing" of stories, when it comes to strikes, the impacts of the strike on the economy and public are foregrounded whereas the deeper causes of the strikes as well as the potential damage to workers living and working conditions if the strike fails are minimized (Parenti, 1986). What tends to be omitted when it comes to coverage of workers unrest are the systemic reasons behind the strike in the first place. The institutionalized ideal of balanced stories, then, "legitimates the prevailing structure of interests" (Hall, 1974, p. 22).

Moreover, despite the news media's claims to objectivity and impartiality, they are nonetheless bound to a certain ideological spectrum which is rarely traversed. Although the news media may include alternative perspectives in their coverage (meaning, there is more ideological variation), this inclusion often remains contained within the boundaries of the 'common-sense' narratives typically found within the news. From this perspective, including oppositional narratives could serve to undermine conflicting viewpoints where criticisms of these hegemonic narratives are subsumed under the dominant ideology in order for it to adapt and rework itself during moments of potential hegemonic ruptures (Gitlin, 2003). Favourable coverage of a subordinate class (i.e. the working class), then, could possibly serve to diffuse or minimise the momentum behind their challenges to hegemony. This follows Gitlin's claims, where he suggests that since "the idea of "objectivity" and the standards of "newsworthiness" are loose, the hegemonic routines of news coverage are vulnerable to the demands of oppositional and deviant groups. Through the

everyday workings of journalism, large-scale social conflict is imported into the news institution and reproduced there: reproduced, however, in terms derived from the dominant ideology. Discrepant statements about reality are acknowledged, but muffled, softened, blurred, fragmented, domesticated at the same time" (2003, p. 270). Through institutionalized standards of objectivity, impartiality, and newsworthiness, the news media are nimble enough to face burgeoning threats. Since the news media, particularly newspapers of record, are supposed to represent the pertinent issues occurring within society at a given time in order to maintain their credibility they are obligated to cover emergent struggles once they have garnered enough recognition. This brings me back to a central focus of this thesis: how do newspapers of record, including *the New York Times, the Washington Post,* and the *Wall Street Journal*, who have consistently and historically played a vital role in the preservation of the hegemony of liberal capitalist representative democracy in the United States, react to growing challenges to this very hegemonic order?

Now, let us return to the question of hegemony.

*The Question Concerning Hegemony*

Gramsci's idea of hegemony draws upon two influential theories found within Marxist theory in the early twentieth century: French philosopher Georges Sorel's notion of historical blocs, as well as the original conception of hegemony developed by Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian Bolsheviks. Sorel's notion of historical blocs upends previous Marxist assertions about the deterministic location and orientation of classes within economic structures, where classes were seen as "structural locations in an objective system" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 38). Instead, Sorel (2004) argues, social reality should be understood as indeterminate where class

locations are in a state of fluctuation contingent upon the rearrangement of blocs themselves. Here the recomposition of historical blocs carries the capacity to affect the locations of classes. Lenin's theorization of hegemony, on the other hand, spoke more concretely to the conditions pertinent to Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For Lenin (1962), hegemony was often understood as a form of class alliance between the peasantry and the proletariat. Since a bourgeois revolution had yet to solidify itself in Russia at the time of Lenin's writings, Lenin proposed that through the mutual interests of this class alliance, the peasants and the workers could topple and overcome the budding bourgeoisie. Through the synthesis of these two ideas, Gramsci gradually expanded upon his notion of hegemony, which was originally quite similar to Lenin's.

However, it is important to note that Gramsci's definition of hegemony consistently changed throughout his writings. Due to the fact that Gramsci was theorizing while imprisoned by Italian fascists, his texts are often ambiguous, unfinished, and in some cases, as with his theorizations about hegemony, contradictory. British historian Perry Anderson has tracked Gramsci's changing definitions of hegemony in his book, *The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*. He notes three distinct developments throughout Gramsci's writings.

Gramsci's central considerations when it came to theorizing about hegemony broadly was dissecting both the composition of power as well as how these compositions acted. He was primarily concerned with the contrast between how domination operated and how hegemony, understood in contradistinction to domination as consent, functioned and how these two components were directed or exercised throughout a given society thereby providing legitimacy for the groups and/or classes in power (Anderson, 2017). Gramsci was interested in three

relationships that shaped his conceptions of power: force versus consent, domination versus hegemony, and violence versus civilization.

In Gramsci's first definition of hegemony, he located hegemony within civil society (or, rather, civil society participated in the direction of hegemony), and domination to political society. It's important to note that Gramsci considered civil society as "the ensemble of organisms commonly called the 'private'", whereas political society was a pseudonym for the state" (2007, p. 1518-19). As Anderson notes, "these two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government" (2007, p. 44). In this iteration of hegemony, for Gramsci, hegemony is located within civil society while domination is considered the domain of the State or political society. Gramsci's hegemony at this point was largely connected to ruling by consent. However, it behooves us to consider what Gramsci meant when referring to consent. As Gramsci scholar, Joseph V. Femia notes, "pre-modern notions of consent had nothing to do with individual acceptance by each and every human being; nor did they entail express choice or deliberate authorization. They simply affirmed that the authority of the ruler[s] somehow flows, at least in part, from the fact that his [or her] subjects – understood as a corporate community, transcending individual preferences – allow or acknowledge it" (1987, p. 37). Femia continues, "hegemony is instead characterized by a third type of conformity: that rising from some degree of conscious attachment to, or agreement with, certain core elements of society. This type of assenting behaviour, which may or may not relate to perceived interest, is bound up with the concept of 'legitimacy', with a belief that the demands for conformity are more or less justified and proper" (1987, p. 47).

To complicate things further, Gramsci elaborated on this duality between political society and civil society, which he considered to be two means of class power (1996). Gramsci writes, "political society (or dictatorship, or coercive apparatus to ensure that the popular masses conform to the type of production and economy of a given moment) was counterposed to civil society (or hegemony of a social group over the whole national society exercised through so-called private organisations, like the church, trade unions, schools and so on)" (1992, p. 616). With this explanation, Gramsci began theorizing about hegemony and how it is produced in Western capitalist societies which were markedly distinct from both Russian society during the Bolshevik revolution as well as Italian society during Gramsci's life. Western capitalist societies, at this time, had developed a more intricate and complex web of institutions comprising civil society while maintaining (or, perhaps, elusively maintaining) overt distinctions between political and civil society as seen by the West's development of parliamentary democracy (Anderson, 2007). Femia writes, "the elaborate structure of liberal democracy (eg. Parliaments, courts, elections, etc.) [creates] a façade of freedom and popular control by educating [people] in the ways of bourgeois politics, [which] conditions them to accept the status quo willingly" (1987, p. 28). Russia, on the other hand, under Czarism, largely remained a feudal society with a spattering of bourgeois developments; whereas Italy was still undergoing a process of unification where two contrasting economic systems shaped the landscape of the country. An incipient industrial capitalist economy in the North and an agrarian-peasant based economy in the South.

This change in Gramsci's conceptualization of civil and political society is important because it altered how he perceived hegemony. From this perspective, the functioning of hegemony shifted from being consent based to consent-coercion based (Anderson, 2007). As Thomas R. Bates writes, "the 'normal' exercise of hegemony in a particular regime is characterized by a

combination of force and consensus variously equilibrated, without letting force subvert consensus too much, making it appear that the force is based on the consent of the majority" (1996, p. 363). Gramsci, therefore, expanded the sites in which hegemony acts, now including the 'organs of political hegemony' which include executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the liberal state (Gramsci, 1996; Anderson, 2007). Instead of hegemony existing strictly in the domain of civil society (or civil hegemony), he now locates it within political society (or political hegemony) as well. By expanding hegemony to include political society, Gramsci includes coercion as a central component of the practice of hegemony. Gramsci notes, "the normal exercise of hegemony [is] characterized by a combination of force and consent" (2007, p. 1638). Here, it's important to note that while Gramsci remarks on how hegemony exists in both spheres, he is not collapsing these distinctive spheres into a single location. Or, at least, he hasn't done that yet.

In Gramsci's third iteration of hegemony, he flattens civil and political society together, where "consent and coercion alike become co-extensive with the state" (Anderson, 2007, p. 45). Here, Gramsci remarks, "the state (in its integral meaning) is dictatorship + hegemony'; elsewhere Gramsci explains, "b[ut] the State should be understood not merely [as] the governmental apparatus, but also the "private" apparatus of hegemony or civil society" (1992, p. 810-11). While this iteration of Gramsci's hegemony has received the most criticism and rebuke, with scholars referring to Gramsci's categorizations of the indistinctness of civil and political society as reductive and obfuscating the function and role of both spheres, I think it is nonetheless important to remember that Gramsci was reflecting on hegemony in Western capitalist parliamentary democracies when making this assertion. Perhaps, here, Gramsci is considering the role of capital, or capitalism, as the background to the functioning of hegemony in Western

capitalist parliamentary democracies where political society and civil society are stitched together by capital itself. As Anderson notes,

> It is impossible to partition the ideological functions of bourgeois class power between civil society and the state, in the way that [Gramsci] initially sought to do. The fundamental form of the Western parliamentary state—the juridical sum of its citizenry—is itself the hub of the ideological apparatuses of capitalism. The ramified complexes of the cultural control systems within civil society—radio, television, cinema, churches, newspapers, political parties—undoubtedly play a critical complementary role in assuring the stability of the class order of capital (2007, p. 50).

Or perhaps the stitching together of political and civil society by capital is best reflected by Gramsci's second iteration of hegemony where hegemony exists simultaneously in both spheres. This thesis adopts and refers to Gramsci's second iteration of hegemony where capital remains a central feature of hegemony in both political and civil society as well as the glue which bounds these spheres together. Gramsci's second iteration of hegemony, in my view, is the most compelling because, despite the similarities between each hegemonic sphere, the operations and functionality of political and civil society are quite different. While each sphere works in tandem (although, perhaps, more fluidly than pre-determined), they both work to uphold and maintain the presuppositions of capitalist society. As Femia attests "this ideological superiority [manifested and guided by civil society] must have solid economic roots: [quoting Gramsci] 'if hegemony is ethic-political, it must also be economic, it must also have its foundations in the decisive function that the leading group exercises in the decisive nucleus of economic activity' (1987, p. 25).

Interestingly, with the West's discovery of Gramsci's writings in the late sixties and seventies, a period in which labour was forced into a long retreat (and neoliberalism's ascent began), Gramsci's first iteration of hegemony became the leading interpretation. Hegemony was

relegated to the realm of the superstructure, to civil society; it emerged as largely a cultural concern. By divorcing hegemony from the political sphere, erasing its intimate relationship with the economic formations of a given society, hegemony itself was reduced to a cultural process, a process presumably with endless shapes and formations; and yet, as philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2001) notes, the shape and form that always went unannounced in contemporary articulations of hegemony was capital itself. As Zizek notes, "… the smooth functioning of Capital is that which remains the same, that which 'always returns to its place', in the unconstrained struggle for hegemony" (2001, p. 223). Zizek's reminder is of the utmost important for this thesis as labour itself exists as a perennial threat to capital's hegemony.

So, while it's important to see how hegemony changes, it is equally as important to see what aspects and elements remain the same over time. Furthermore, one must assess what these changes are rather than defaulting to the elusive reference of change itself. How substantive are these observed changes? Other pertinent questions must be asked: do these changes in hegemony represent a fundamental rift from what came before? Or do the central premises of previous hegemonic orders remain rooted in the bonds holding this seemingly new bloc together? Does the rhetoric of change and process, when it comes to hegemony, obscure the reality of how hegemony acts and what hegemony looks like in a given moment? Yes, hegemony persistently undergoes changes; it's dynamic rather than static. But what shape do these changes assume? By making hegemony synonymous with change do we empty hegemony of any or all of its form? If hegemony is consistently and significantly changing, assuming a myriad of different forms, why have representations of labour and the working class largely remained the same? These considerations bring us back to the relationship between hegemony, representation, and the news media.

*Hegemony & Representation*

One of the intentions of this thesis generally is assessing what the representations of workers, as seen through the media coverage of Amazon warehouse workers, tells us about how labour is valued during an unprecedented crisis which has caused mass devastation in the form of economic degradation, rampant death and sickness, the further deterioration of local and regional cultures, as well as the increased financial destitution and precarity of workers across both the United States and the rest of the world. These widespread and devastating calamities have occurred at the same time as historic levels of wealth have been funneled to already extraordinarily wealthy people, including Amazon's former CEO and current chairman of Amazon's board of directors, Jeff Bezos, through government legislations such as the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act dubiously referred to as the Cares Act. In fact, Amazon was one of the many fortunate companies who have reaped considerable rewards from the Cares Act by means of which they secured historically low borrowing rates from the U.S. government (Brenner, 2020). Robert Brenner has referred to these rates as "the lowest borrowing rates ever secured in the US corporate-bond market" (2020, p. 18).

Stuart Hall states in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997), "in part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them" (p. 3). From this perspective, language plays an important role in the function of hegemony and representation. As Gramsci observes, "every language contains the elements of a conception of the world" (2012, p. 414). Through the work of hegemony, as we have seen, certain images, cultural forms, and

conceptions prevail over others. The problem of representation, then, according to Ernesto Laclau (2001), is at the heart of the problem of hegemony.

As mentioned previously, representations, including frames and images, become dominant and enmeshed in 'common sense' narratives, in part through perpetuation and pervasiveness. Media institutions like *the New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* rely on a repertoire of previously established and familiar frames about certain classes, groups, or cultures (like the greedy/lazy labour frame) in order to quickly churn out stories which align with commonly found and typically accepted representations of the aforementioned groups. This is one of the reasons why Diana Kendall remarks, "with regard to the portrayal of class in the media, all of this means that we are not receiving 'raw' information or 'mere' entertainment that accurately reflects the realities of life in different classes; in fact, audiences are receiving formulaic products that have been previously sanitized and schematized so that readers and viewers do not have to think for themselves or deal with the underlying problems of our society" (2011, p. 6).

As soon as certain frames and representations enter common sense narratives, it becomes extraordinarily challenging to usurp and fundamentally change them. This is partly due to the fact that regardless if, say, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, or the *Wall Street Journal*, start including more positive representations of workers, this expanded repertoire of representations may increase the diversity of frames available, but it does not necessarily displace the "dominant regime of representation" (Hall, 1997 , p. 274). As Hall notes, "the strategy challenges the binaries – but it does not undermine them" (1997, p. 275). This is precisely why, as I mentioned earlier, once certain frames, images, and representations become dominant, alternative frames, including critiques or the inclusion of positive images, are often

obligated to refer back to the previous dominant regime of representations *while* advancing an oppositional perspective.

This issue is all the more acute when dominant institutions, such as American newspapers of record, are the ones tasked with, or perhaps task themselves with, diversifying their representational portfolio possibly as a result of hegemonic disruption. The very institutions responsible, in part for perpetuating hostile, demeaning, antagonistic, and even disingenuous representations of underrepresented, often ignored, or historically maligned groups and classes, such as labourers, are *not* adequate sites for destroying and replacing these established binaries. While I admit there could be a handful of favourable effects produced in the short term if established media institutions expanded their outlook and ideological parameters in regards to workers and the working class, this argument fails to consider Raymond Williams assertion that, " any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and opposition which question or threaten its dominance" (1980, p. 141). This means that institutions embroiled in upholding and preserving hegemony must move and respond to rising opposition in order to effectually neuter these challengers in an attempt to continue maintaining their hegemonic position.

My intention with this thesis, therefore, is not to argue that newspapers of record need to incorporate better representations of workers. Instead, I seek to illustrate the role these institutions play in maintaining a hegemonic order which is ideologically and materially incentivized to continue reproducing anti-worker and anti-labour movement sentiments, even if their frames and representations of workers, such as Amazon warehouse workers, are subtly, discretely, or even unnoticeably antagonistic to their readers. The historic and contemporary role of established media companies, companies who have served as important vectors for the

diffusion of dominant ideologies, such as the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* and the *Wall Street Journal,* is to participate in the construction of frames, narratives, and representations of labour movements which are intended to nullify, water down, and ultimately to mobilize against workers struggles.

## Chapter 2: Research Methods

If the role of the dominant media is to assist in the construction of the initial frames and narratives about emerging (or recurring) events or phenomena then one of the fundamental functions of the media is assisting in the assembling of comprehensive images of the world which we refer back to as new and potentially antagonistic information becomes available. As Edelman (1993) states, "what we 'know' about the social world depends upon how we frame and interpret the cues we receive about that world" (p. 231). The media then acts as a vector between the elite classes, including the state and corporations, and the general population offering cues and structuration to the news stories they publish.

Since I am engaging with news stories and the news media's relationship to hegemony, I chose a qualitative methodological approach which situates the textual details of the articles, where tone, possible biases, and a myriad of perspectives could be found, interrogated, and analyzed. As such, I have chosen to employ framing analysis in order to examine the news media's coverage, including news and editorial coverage, of Amazon warehouse workers in American newspapers of record, including the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* as well as the *Wall Street Journal.*

Throughout my thesis, I explore the following research questions:

1. How were Amazon warehouse workers framed by the media during COVID-19?

2. How were Amazon warehouse workers framed by the media prior to COVID-19? What were the similarities and/or differences?

3. How does the current news coverage of Amazon warehouse workers fit within historical representations of labour?

4. What does this coverage suggest in terms of how labour is valued and understood today?

Framing analysis is particularly fruitful for my research as it focuses on how news stories frame people's perceptions of the world which may or may not serve the dominant interests of specific groups (Basu, 2018; Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Frames contribute to what Frederic Jameson (1981) refers to as social narratives, where certain frames are repeated frequently enough that they come to represent a set of social meanings by shaping ideologically constructed social narratives. By looking at how news stories are constructed, I am able to analyze how ideology and pre-existing power structures are expressed through syntax, language, and grammar (van Dijk, 1988). According to Robert Entman (1993), one of the leading media scholars associated with framing analysis, "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating a text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem, definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate and prescribe" (p. 52).

From this perspective, through selection and saliency, frames work to distinguish and define problems. According to Entman, frames describe who the agents are in a given story and what the causes of the problems are. Frames project and invoke moral judgements and often offer fixes, solutions, or remedies. More importantly, however, "frames call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead to audiences having different reactions… framing in this light plays a major role in the exertion of political power, and the frame in a news text is really the imprint of power" (Entman, 1993, p. 55). Given the

longstanding history of an often-hostile relationship between the news media and workers as well as the labour movement, framing analysis offers me a portal into the construction of what is considered important on behalf of the newspapers in question.

However, as Entman notes, frames are also defined by what they omit, where "the omissions of potential problem definitions, explanations, evaluations, and recommendations may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience' (1993, p. 54). In his seminal study concerning the relationship between the Student New Left Movement and the news media, Todd Gitlin echoes Entman's framing theory. For Gitlin, frames are about "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (2003, p.7). Interestingly, a frequently cited problem with how the news media portrays labour is directly connected to the type of information *missing or absent* in their coverage. For example, as Christopher Erickson and Daniel Mitchell (1996) illustrate in their article, "Information on Strikes and Union Settlements: Patterns of Coverage in a 'Newspaper of Record,'" labour is largely covered only when a dramatic event, such as a strike, takes place. This suggests that considerations about labour are often omitted as a concern for the news media generally unless it fits within this commonly used disruptive event frame. In fact, one could go so far as to argue that this disruptive event frame is the leading way in which the news media constructs images and representations of labour. Within this context, it's important to inquire whose voices are prioritized in the news media's coverage of labour and what information is absent, under-reported, or glossed over.

As the news media ramped up their reporting about Amazon warehouse workers after several workers began openly protesting the working conditions at Amazon, the disruptive event frame

is important to my analysis. In fact, two 'events' in particular have come to shape the trajectory of the news media's reporting of Amazon fulfillment center's labour unrest. The relationship between these events as defined by the news media and what is and is not covered during those events will be further elaborated on in the following chapter.

Gitlin expands upon the meaning of framing analysis by including the procedural use of frames by reporters as a common journalistic practice. Frames are intimately connected to the production of the news, where he suggests that frames "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [and to] package the information for efficient relay to their audiences" (2003, p. 7). The speed in which the news is produced has only accelerated since Gitlin developed this argument in the late twentieth century prior to the 24/7 news cycle. Seeing the dual operation of frames as both a foundational journalistic practice as well as one of the primary vehicles for the communication of ideology and the rearticulation of prevailing power relations emphasizes the role the news media plays in forging, building, and developing what is come to be understood as 'common sense.' The use of framing analysis in this thesis is to assess how the news media comes to serve and represent the interests of specific classes by naturalizing, assimilating, or omitting certain narratives and information from the ongoing conversation about the role of Amazon in the global economy as well as the declining role of labour due to the onset of neoliberalism in Western society and the conditions Amazon warehouse workers are forced to endure.

Another integral component of how the news media frames certain events, objects, and people is what media studies scholars have referred to as news values. News values are argued to shape what is and is not counted as news which I use alongside framing analysis to further

contextualize the frames and narratives consistently found throughout my research (Cushion et al, 2016). Several aspects influence the production of news values within journalism as an occupation, including but not limited to: the valuing of event over process; effect over cause; the simplification or dilution of stories; a chronic fixation of conflict and dramatic events; and a myopic focus on the latest developments of a story (Basu, 2018; McNair 1994). As Laura Basu notes, "journalism tends to be much more focused on specific events than on ongoing processes (such as the dynamics of neoliberalism, for instance) and gives more attention to those events (especially spectacular ones) than their causes" (2018, p. 24). News values, then, assists in shaping how a story is framed.

Stuart Hall further explicates the phenomena of news values, writing:

> It is sufficient to say that news values provide the criteria in the routine practices of journalism which enable journalists, editors and newsmen to decide routinely and regularly which stories are 'newsworthy' and which are not, which stories are major 'lead' stories and which are relatively insignificant, which stories to run and which to drop. Although they are nowhere written down, formally transmitted or codified, news values seem to be widely shared between the different news media, and form a core element in the professional socialization, practice, and ideology of newsmen (1982, p. 54).

Here, it becomes clear that news values first shape what stories are considered newsworthy for publication as well as contribute to how the stories are told.

Yet, Hall continues on and identifies another aspect that shapes the production of the news: the sources journalists rely on in order to tell the story, or in Hall's words the 'primary' definers (1982). Primary definers, Hall argues, tend to set the parameters of news stories by providing the initial definition of the problem to reporters (1982). Importantly, primary definers are typically politicians, businesspeople, as well as other official sources; meaning, primary definers are more often than not representatives of power or occupy powerful positions within a given society. This

poses the question: if the people who initially define the problems contained within news stories are simultaneously the ones who either represent and/or embody the relations of power defining our society, how does that affect the ways in which the news media discusses and reports on groups and movements, such as labourers, who sit in opposition and are antagonistic to those who act as primary definers? For example, how is the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest affected if the stories are largely shaped by Amazon corporate representatives, Amazon's self-published material, or additional actors who are affiliated with Amazon? How credible is a story then if Amazon's public relations department and/or representatives have a disproportionate access to the journalists covering Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest? These questions will be addressed throughout this thesis.

As mentioned prior, I have examined three major newspapers with large daily circulation in the United States for this thesis: the *New York Times* (NYT), the *Washington Post* (WaPo), and the *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ). All three newspapers have significant reach and influence in determining the national narrative of events, people, and phenomena. Despite the fact that many scholars, businesspeople, and journalists alike predicted the demise of the dominant media due to the rise of the internet and the "proliferation of voices online," American newspapers of record have maintained their grip on shaping and effecting news narratives across the United States (Basu, 2018). As Edward Hermann (2018) remarks, "some argue that the Internet and the new communication technologies are breaking the corporate stranglehold on journalism and opening an unprecedented era of interactive democratic media. There is no evidence to support this view as regards journalism and mass communication. In fact, one could argue that the new technologies are exacerbating the problem" (p. 51). McChesney (2015) similarly notes how "paid journalism in the United States is disproportionately in 'old media'"; where "internet news

sites [act as] aggregators of the news gathered by old media rather than producers of news content" (p. 51). With the ownership of newspapers under a handful of media and financial conglomerates coupled with the demise of small to medium sized newspapers across the United States, wire services associated with newspapers of record are one of the primary vehicles in which the news proliferates.

The *New York Times* syndicate, in particular, is used by several newspapers and their stories are frequently published across the news media. Many consider the *NYT* as crucial reading for people interested in the news (Erickson & Mitchell, Kendall, 1996). Journalist scholar, Jack Lule (2001), has iterated, "though not the biggest, [the *NYT*] may well be the most significant newspaper in the world" (p. 6). Moreover, the New York Times Company, the company who publishes the *NYT*, is considered to be one of the biggest news providers in the world (Basu, 2018).

The *Washington Post* is particularly relevant to my research for two reasons: first, alongside the *NYT*, their wire services are relied on by numerous newspapers and media outlets. As Michael Parenti states, the *NYT* and the *WaPo* "not only feed information to the public but to other news media as well" (1986, p. x). Secondly, Jeff Bezos purchased the *WaPo* in 2013 during a period of time in which newspapers were auctioned off for a meagre fraction of their previous worth (McChesney, 2015, 2011). Although the *Post* is owned by Bezos, and not Amazon, the purchase itself coincides with Amazon's development of Amazon production studios which was created in 2010. Both of these purchases point to Bezos's interest in becoming both a producer and distributor of cultural content.

Lastly, the *Wall Street Journal* has been historically noted for having the least biased coverage of workers and the labour movement (Puette, 1992). Jo-Ann Mort, in the 1990s, commented on how "the *Wall Street Journal* regularly opens its op-ed pages to union voices in a special "counterpoint" feature. Contrast this with the *New York Times,* where it is extremely rare to read a labour point of view" (1992, p. 83). Since the *WSJ* is the leading business newspaper in the United States they have often produced more in-detailed reports regarding labour; perhaps because labour remains an important consideration for businesspeople throughout the world. However, Rupert Murdoch's company, News Corp, purchased the *WSJ* in 2007 which could have led to the newspaper adopting a more conservative tone.

Due to COVID-19 being an ongoing crisis, I have limited the time frame in which I gathered articles and opinion pieces published about Amazon warehouse workers accordingly. Importantly, to interrogate any possible changes in news coverage before and after COVID-19 became an emergent crisis, I expanded my timeline to include coverage written up to seven months before former President Donald Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency, which occurred on March 13, 2020. I expanded my research to seven months after COVID-19 was declared a national emergency in the United States because the *WaPo* published an article on August 21st, 2019, about a tour their reporters took alongside lawmakers and other media representatives of an Amazon fulfilment center that Amazon organized after they received backlash due to the Stop BEZOS Act Senator Bernie Sanders introduced in the Senate approximately a year prior in September 2018. Almost a year after the *WaPo* reported on their warehouse tour, media representatives were invited once more to an Amazon fulfilment center. This time reported by the *New York Times* on June 9, 2020. This time media representatives and policymakers were invited by Amazon to assess the changes Amazon had allegedly made to

illustrate the preventative measures they had installed to protect warehouse workers from contracting COVID-19. These events, occurring roughly a year apart, demonstrate the persistent critiques waged against Amazon regarding their relentless treatment of warehouse workers while also affording me a glance into any potential changes in reporting that could have taken place between 2019 and 2020.

Thus, I began culling news stories and opinion pieces from August 13, 2019, up until the American presidential election on November 5, 2020. I chose to conclude my timeline on the day of the presidential election due to the fact that a handful of Amazon employees, including Christian Smalls, a former Amazon warehouse worker who became a public figure fighting on behalf of Amazon workers across the United States throughout COVID-19, announced they intended to initiate a general strike on election day. Although the general strike never materialized, I wanted to see if the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, or the *WSJ*, would cover their initiative. They did not.

Stories were selected through an archive search of the respective papers alongside a Factiva database search during the aforementioned timeline where I used the following keywords: "*Amazon warehouse workers, Amazon warehouse, Amazon warehouse worker, Amazon workers,* and *Amazon worker*." The search terms were generated from both a preliminary literature review of labour unrest at Amazon as well as insights gleaned from previous attempts at finding stories about worker unrest at Amazon, using keywords such as "*strike, worker unrest,* and *labor protest."* Unfortunately, these searches yielded minor results. I chose to use the term Amazon warehouse worker instead of Amazon fulfilment center worker, in part, because fulfilment center

worker is Amazon's chosen rhetoric to obscure the fact that Amazon fulfilment center workers are actually warehouse workers.

In total, I archived 143 articles from all three newspapers, where 39 were reported by the *WaPo*, 78 from the *NYT*, and 25 were published by the *WSJ*. Interestingly, the *WaPo* published 8 articles from August 13th until December 31st, 2019; the *NYT* published 9 articles, and the *WSJ* published 2 articles within the same time-period. In 2020, the *NYT* far surpassed both the *WaPo* as well as the *WSJ*, publishing 69 articles, 31 articles, and 23 articles respectively. The following chapters, then, analyze the news content where I first discuss how Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest was framed during COVID-19. I then proceed to compare the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers from 2019 to 2020. In the succeeding chapter, I outline four distinct yet overlapping periods classifying the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers throughout COVID-19. These periods include: zombie reporting, where the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* default to institutionalized news values and the perspectives from primary definers to shape their stories; the moment of discovery, which signals the onset of the disruptive event frame causing a shift in the coverage produced by these newspapers of record; Amazon as painful but necessary, where reporters from the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* lose interest in critically covering the labour unrest ongoing at Amazon facilities and begin relying on Amazon's corporate representatives as primary definers again; and lastly, the workers protest as hazy memory period, which speaks to the petering off of coverage where Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest fades into the background. In the second findings chapter, I assess the role that media amnesia, as characterized by scholar Laura Basu, plays in the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ's* active disremembering of their pre-pandemic reporting throughout COVID-19.

# Chapter 3: Covering the Pandemic: 4 Phases of Coverage of Amazon Warehouse Workers Labour Unrest

In this chapter I outline and assess the overarching framing of Amazon labour unrest throughout COVID-19 produced by the *Washington Post,* the *New York Times,* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The period I am examining begins from the first article published by one of the aforementioned news outlets discussing COVID-19 and Amazon on March 11, 2020, two days before President Donald Trump declared COVID-19 a national emergency, until the American presidential election on November 5, 2020. As the background against which the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest becomes legible this chapter uses both the patterns Michael Parenti discussed in his book, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media,* when analyzing the American media's coverage of labour strikes in the twentieth century, as well as the themes and frames Todd Gitlin remarks upon when assessing the coverage of the New Left Student Movement. Since Amazon warehouse workers are in the process of unionizing, where some warehouses have been working towards unionizing for several years now, the strikes, protests, and additional worker actions sit outside traditional forms of unionized labour protests which occurred frequently throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. From this perspective, the worker protests orchestrated and organized by Amazon warehouse workers across the country occupy a liminal space existing outside of union-sanctioned worker unrest and yet bound to wide-spread and burgeoning labour strikes which have been in the process of developing since roughly 2016 (beginning with the few remaining unionized labour forces, including teachers and nurses, successfully striking), but has expeditiously grown since the advent of COVID-19. In the United States alone, labour strikes have increased since COVID-19

began, reaching more than 800 strikes since March 2020 – the largest number of strikes in the United States in over a decade (Paydayreport, 2020).

While strikes have reached unparalleled heights in the twenty-first century, a coordinated and co-extensive labour movement has yet to tangibly materialize. As such, worker led protests remain contained within their respective industries and more often than not are hitched to a single workplace, corporation or employer. Since the labour unrest enacted by Amazon's warehouse workers sits outside of both a broader labour movement as well as traditional forms of union-led strikes, I combined Parenti's and Gitlin's findings as a way to compare and contrast how the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers aligns with and yet diverges from previous worker-led movements. Combining Parenti and Gitlin's observations are fruitful for this research as Parenti is looking at unionized labour contexts while Gitlin's social movement focus captures some of the distinctive extra-union nature of Amazon mobilizing.

Michael Parenti (1986) found seven foundational generalizations which were repeatedly used by the American press, focusing on the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post,* during moments of labour struggle. These include:

1. Instead of locating strikes as a product of the persistent struggle between labour and capital, the press largely framed labour as acting in bad faith, where strikes were portrayed as unnecessary and avoidable senseless acts.
2. The press tends to highlight the deals, policies, or proposals which reflect favourably on management while undermining or even omitting the cutbacks and grievances of labour. In doing this, labour appears as "self-indulgent to the point of being self-destructive" (Parenti, 1986, p. 84).

3. The press tends to refrain from mentioning the bonuses, increases or benefits management receives from negotiations with labour while, at the same time, emphasizing the alleged boons labour would receive if they accepted managements offers.
4. In line with the press's established and institutionalized news values, impacts of strikes are focused on, whereas the deeper causes behind the strikes are often rarely discussed. The effects of strikes on the economy and ordinary citizens tend to be highlighted.
5. While discussing the alleged impact strikes will have on the economy, the effects of the strike on workers lives if the strikes fail or if they accept managements offers are rarely brought up.
6. The press either downplays or outright ignores the reproductive assistance and mutual support provided to workers by other unions, organizations, families of workers, etc. This subsequently leads to an erasure of the class dimensions of the strikes as well as suppressing the support striking workers receive across different sectors in addition to the public.
7. The state is consistently presented as a "neutral arbiter in the struggle between capital and labour, acting on behalf of the 'national interest'" (Parenti, 1986, p. 84). Here, the coercive force and tactics employed by either the employer or the state are often under-reported (or totally absent in the reporting) which are used to pre-maturely stop decisive moments of labour unrest.

All seven of these generalizations, as I will illustrate throughout this chapter, crop up and shape the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest, albeit, in some cases, more discretely, loosely, and occasionally in an alternative form than what Parenti has described. Nevertheless, it's important to note that while Parenti is discussing moments in which labour and capital have

entered negotiations with each other due to the cessation of production produced by strikes, Amazon warehouse workers have not yet entered into direct dialogue with their employer. This is largely due to the fact that Amazon warehouse workers in the United States have not been able to achieve certification to create legally recognized unions.

However, organizations such as Amazonians United are currently acting as de facto and informal unions across warehouses in the United States who are assiduously working towards developing legally verified unions (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2021). But, because the unionization efforts by Amazon warehouse workers have yet to solidify (due to the fact that their efforts are perpetually and consistently under assault by Amazon executives and management), Amazon warehouse workers have not been able to successfully form a collective body which appoints representatives to discuss and negotiate workers grievances directly with Amazon. Amazon warehouse workers, then, face additional hurdles when it comes to fighting against the exploitative practices rampantly found within their workplaces than unionized workers do. Unionized workers, however, still face several obstacles when advocating for themselves by challenging their employers. And, as Parenti (1986) notes in his book, the press more often than not positions themselves against unionized workers struggles.

Moreover, due to the fact that strikes are more difficult to maintain and enact in non-unionized workplaces, Amazon warehouse workers strikes, and labour protests have mostly occurred within contained and shortened timelines. Considering the state largely intervenes when a strike has carried on over a prolonged period of time, there has yet to be direct state intervention during Amazon warehouse workers periods of labour unrest. Yet, as mentioned above, Amazon has ruthlessly and determinedly attempted to undermine any worker unrest across their workforce, whether the workers are warehouse workers, delivery drivers, pilots, or workers at sorting

centers, etc., through either directly or indirectly using coercive force. For example, Amazon hired notoriously anti-labour, union-busting, and violent-prone privatized police forces like the Pinkertons (Gurly, 2020). As such, for the seventh generalization, I will be addressing how the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal* report on the methods, strategies, or tactics employed by Amazon to deter their warehouse workers labour actions (if they even do).

As noted earlier, one of the limitations of Parenti's arguments when applied to the case of Amazon is his focus on labour struggles in unionized environments. Given that Amazon workers are not unionized their actions are also usefully understood through the lens of social movement studies like that of Gitlin. Gitlin (2003) found twelve observable frames used by the media when covering the New Left Student Movement in the sixties. As some of the frames are historically and contextually contingent to the politics of the time of Gitlin's writing (for example, frames concerning the presence of "Viet Cong" flags), I have excluded them from my analysis. This leaves us with six observable frames which are applicable to the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest:

1. The trivialization of the movement's actions, goals, language, etc.
2. Concentrating on portraying counter-positions within the groups or movement in question
3. Marginalization of protestors and workers
4. Criticizing or focusing on the number of people present
5. Criticizing or focusing on the ineffectiveness of the movement and/or labour actions
6. Defaulting to relying on official sources, including government authorities or, in the case of Amazon warehouse workers, corporate representatives

Gitlin's sixth observable frame aligns with Stuart Hall's analysis of the media's dependence on primary definers to initially shape the scope of the media's stories.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Gitlin was observing the reciprocal relationship between the New Left Student Movement and the media as it developed over a period of years. My thesis, on the other hand, is focused on a small window of time within a potentially (and currently seemingly) larger context of workers resistance at Amazon. In this case, then, the frames observed could likely change and include additional frames found in Gitlin's analysis that I've excluded from this thesis. Throughout this chapter, I will be discussing both Gitlin's and Parenti's observable frames in tandem with one another as the root of both their findings illustrate an overt effort to marginalize, water-down, undermine, or dilute both the conditions behind the strikes and/or movements, as well any efforts by labourers or students attempts to change the environments in which they continue existing.

I have broken down the coverage over these seven months into four distinct yet occasionally overlapping phases: Zombie Reporting, which covers the media's early reporting and highlights their dependence on news values and primary definers in their uncritical coverage of Amazon. The Moment of Discovery, where two disruptive events occurred subsequently changing the shape and tone of the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ's* coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. Amazon as Painful but Necessary, where the news media's coverage reverts to their initial phase of reporting. Although the news media offers occasionally critical coverage, more often than not this criticism is contained by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ's* attempts to undermine the bourgeoning labour actions. And finally, Workers Protests as Hazy Memory, where the labour unrest at Amazon warehouses is reduced to a periphery issue relegated to the past in the coverage produced by these newspapers of record.

*Zombie Reporting*

I refer to the initial period of reporting about Amazon workers, which occurred from March 11th until April 2nd, 2020 as Zombie Reporting for two reasons. First, the *New York Times,* the *Washington Post,* and the *Wall Street Journal,* were slow to pick up the story about Amazon warehouse workers protesting, striking, walking-out, or shutting down warehouses as COVID-19 became an international issue. Twenty-three articles were published during this period of coverage in total by the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ*. However, the bulk of these articles (twenty) were published in the last week of March despite workers protesting against Amazon's ineffective COVID-19 measures since the beginning of the month (Amazonians United, 2020). While these news outlets waxed poetic about the potential effects of COVID-19 on workers, the image of workers perpetuated by these outlets remained generalized and elusive. Coverage focused mostly on the discrepancy between what Ursula Huws (2020) refers to as 'fixed workers', workers who are able to work remotely and virtually, and 'footloose' workers, precarious workers who are obligated to work outside the house either as in-transit workers (i.e. delivery gig workers) or workers who process and prepare goods prior to delivery (i.e. warehouse workers). Footloose workers largely consist of Black, Brown, or migrant workers; workers who have few recourses if they fall ill, injure themselves, or contract the COVID-19 virus (Huws, 2020).

The *WSJ* was the first of the three newspapers to publish an article about Amazon and COVID-19. On March 11, 2020, the *WSJ* published an article entitled, "Amazon Expands Coronavirus Sick-Leave Policy; Paid leave will be available for warehouse staff and other hourly employees affected by the pandemic." Already, it is clear that the *WSJ* is positioning Amazon as forward thinking and conscientious of their employees.

Within the article, Dana Mattioli (2020) writes, “last week, the company eased its policy for unpaid time off in response to the coronavirus outbreak, giving workers the option to take an unlimited amount of unpaid time off through the end of March without being penalized for it. The change affected employees who work in offices, stores, warehouses and any other location that requires a physical presence."

What Mattioli fails to mention is that by March 11th Amazon warehouse workers had already been pressuring Amazon to change their sick-leave policy. Amazonians United (2020), for example, developed and distributed a petition online urging Amazon and Jeff Bezos to change their sick-leave policy both due to fears of contracting COVID-19, a new and emergent virus, as well as expressing worries about the heightened workload Amazon warehouse workers faced as more and more people turned to Amazon in lieu of venturing to their local shops. The petition states, “as Amazon employees and contractors, in both logistics and tech sectors, we are concerned about the company's current lack of protective measures. While Amazon has made some limited coronavirus accommodations, it needs a comprehensive plan to ensure the safety of all of its workers and the larger public, including giving workers paid leave and not simply extending our unpaid leave, as was announced recently” (Amazonians United, 2020). Mattioli, therefore, presented this development in Amazon’s sick leave policy not as a product of ongoing and successful worker pressure, but as an initiative led by Amazon headquarters. While Mattioli celebrates this gracious gesture on behalf of Amazon headquarters, she fails to mention the ramifications and effects unpaid sick leave has on low-waged workers. For workers who are mostly living paycheck to paycheck, taking unpaid time off is not an option.

These absent criticisms are likely, at least in part, due to the fact that Mattioli excludes any voices from Amazon warehouse workers, workers who are affected by Amazon’s change in

policy. Instead, she relies on an anonymous "Amazon spokeswoman" to frame the article. What is most pernicious about this article is its positive framing of Amazon. Following Parenti's second generalization, Mattioli seems to be heralding the meagre policy changes implemented by Amazon without contextualizing it within the broader framework of budding worker resistance and activism within Amazon warehouses. This leads to the second reason as to why I refer to this period of coverage of Amazon warehouse workers as "Zombie Reporting." The coverage of Amazon warehouse workers refrains from developing significant, or even minor, critiques of Amazon during this period. Outside of waging critiques, and following Gitlin's sixth observable frame, the journalists representing each news outlet largely rely on either official sources from Amazon for the direction of their stories or announcements published by Amazon themselves. In most cases, the articles rarely question what Amazon officials are stating. The journalists' dependence on Amazon as primary definers is precisely why this period of coverage is classified as zombie reporting.

The *NYT* first article concerning Amazon warehouse workers and COVID-19 was published on March 18, 2020. The headline reads, "Amazon Halts Orders for Toys as It Prioritizes the Essentials." Once more, the headline of this article posits Amazon as considerate and conscientious of the troubles produced by COVID-19. And yet, despite Karen Weise, the author of the story, commenting on the volume of products entering and exiting the warehouses, warehouse workers are hardly referenced.

Instead, Weise (2020) discusses the challenges Amazon faces to keep up with the heightened demand where she astutely identifies warehouses as a "major choke point in American e-commerce." Rather than expanding upon the central role Amazon warehouse workers played in maintaining supply lines both within the United States as well as globally, she concludes her

article with the following sentence: “On Monday, Amazon announced in a news release that it would hire 100,000 new workers and raise pay by $2 an hour for many employees in response to a surge in delivery orders from people staying at home to combat the spread of the coronavirus.”

Here, Weise reiterates Parenti’s second generalization, where she accentuates the pay increase Amazon warehouse workers would receive from this boon in sales. Yet by referencing the wage increase employees receive without mentioning the surplus profits produced by this spike in sales (or the fact that the work is now dramatically more dangerous and life-threatening), Weise is also articulating Parenti’s third generalization: the gains of management and executives during moments of labour unrest are omitted from the discussion.

The mention of Amazon hiring thousands of new workers during a moment where millions of Americans are being laid off is one of the leading ways in which the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* engage in the news value of balancing the story. As we shall see throughout the following chapters, the news outlets’ emphasis on Amazon’s hiring policies obscures and contains their subsequent stories regarding worker unrest at Amazon. This frame, however, is maintained throughout each outlet’s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. While I discuss this frame in relation to the stories mentioned in this chapter, I will be addressing this issue more substantively in the succeeding chapter.

The *WaPo* waited until March 26, 2020 to publish their first article addressing Amazon warehouse workers and COVID-19. Yet, almost a week prior to this, alternative mainstream news outlets such as *Vice* began publishing stories about Amazon warehouse workers shutting warehouses down due to the fast transmission of COVID-19 (Gurly, 2020). Interestingly, this story was not picked up by any of the newspapers in question. Neither the *NYT, WaPo,* or the

*WSJ* had reported on any of the workers actions taking place at various warehouses across the country at this point in time.

On March 26th, the *WaPo* published two stories, both written by Jay Greene but with slightly altered headlines. One reads, "Amazon workers test positive at 10 U.S. Warehouses," while the other one states, "Amazon workers test positive for COVID-19 at 10 U.S. Warehouses." These articles are the first to mention the brewing tensions between Amazon and their warehouse workers while also acknowledging the fraught history between them as well.

Before celebrating Greene's apparent break from previous coverage, let us look at a few passages from these articles. Greene introduces the story by writing, "the U.S. coronavirus outbreak has spread to at least 10 Amazon warehouses, infecting workers racing to deliver massive volumes of packages for consumers leery of leaving their homes to shop." This sentence achieves two significant outcomes. First, Greene, alongside Weise, and Mattioli, position Amazon as some sort of saviour to the American consumer. Without Amazon (while simultaneously forgetting about Amazon warehouse workers), the average consumer would have to venture out into the contaminated streets, possibly exposing themselves to the deadly COVID-19 virus. This notion of Amazon creating some semblance of safety for consumers by taking on the risk of COVID-19 (while, again, failing to mention that it is the workers assuming this danger), distracts from the fact that transnational corporations, such as Amazon, the second largest employer in the United States, was allowed to remain open while tens of thousands of small-medium businesses were forced to shutter their doors. Instead of questioning why Amazon was one of the few corporations and employers allowed to remain open, they were heralded as both protectors of the people as well as a lifeline to the American economy. As Tim Wu remarks in his opinion piece published by the *NYT* on March 25, 2020, "To put it differently, we need to

realize that the touchless economy (also known as the “distance economy”) may be what stands between us and a full-on economic depression.”

Secondly, by referring to workers “racing” to deliver an unprecedented number of packages to consumers, as if preparing and delivering packages was some sort of game, Greene obscures the nature of the work done at Amazon. The assumption behind this choice of language suggests workers are moving quickly due to the volume of packages generally. Because Greene ignores the punishing nature of work at Amazon (which I will explore in detail in the next chapter), where workers are consistently and instantaneously penalized for failing to meet their egregious quotas, he is unable and unwilling to capture what is happening within these warehouses; warehouses which are positioned as the lifeline to both American consumers and the American economy. Greene also fails to note the stark difference in economic status between many of the consumers relying on Amazon and the workers preparing and delivering their orders. As Jake Alimahomed-Wilson notes in his book, *The Cost of Free Shipping*, “a staggering 82 percent of households making more than US$150,000 per year are Amazon Prime members” (2021, p. 104). While the “touchless economy,” as Wu (2020) reverently refers to it as, may be touchless for the affluent classes, it is in fact not touchless for everyone else.

Greene carries on, writing: “and while Amazon allows warehouse workers to take time off if they're concerned, Bezos also expects the company's warehouses to keep operating, saying in the letter that much of ‘the essential work we do’ requires employees to clock in at the company's warehouses, in its delivery vehicles and more". The letter referred to by Greene was one published by Bezos himself discussing the role of Amazon during COVID-19. Despite the headline of these articles pointing out that ten warehouses in the United States are currently dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks, Greene reiterates Amazon’s sick-leave policy while elevating

the company's "essential" role in the US economy instead of critically questioning how the COVID-19 virus is able to spread quickly if Amazon has instituted policies allegedly developed to contain the virus. Moreover, by March 26th, President Donald Trump had already signed the first COVID relief bill into law which legally guaranteed two weeks of paid sick leave to workers who were quarantining or were sick with COVID-19 (Sing, 2020). The caveats contained within Trump's first COVID relief bill mirrored Amazon's sick leave policy; Amazon workers were only able to receive two weeks paid time off if they could demonstrably prove (i.e. with a doctor's note) that they contracted the COVID-19 virus (Rajendra, 2021).

Before concluding his article, Greene employs Gitlin's second frame, in the name of impartiality, highlighting the dissension amongst Amazon warehouse workers. Greene writes, "Jana Jumpp works stowing products at a warehouse in Jeffersonville, Ind., not far from the Kentucky facility where the virus has spread. Jumpp has worked for Amazon for four years, and she praised the company for offering a program that helped pay for her studies at a local massage school." By including this warehouse worker, who is the only Amazon warehouse worker identified by name in this article, Greene conjures an image of a split workforce during a moment where warehouse workers are fighting for better and more thorough protection from the virus, hazard pay, changing Amazon's automated system of punishment and termination, as well as improving their sick leave policy (Amazonians United, 2020). Interestingly, prior to this quote from Jana Jumpp, Greene writes, "some workers said the lack of information is frightening, even in facilities where there haven't been confirmed reports of the virus." By counter-positing Greene's vague reference to "some" workers who are identifying a key problem with Amazon, the company's total lack of transparency with Jumpp's praise of Amazon, Greene is effectually undermining the very real fears and issues that are foundational to Amazon warehouse work. It isn't until March 30th, when

the *NYT* publishes Steven Greenhouses op-ed, "Is Your Grocery Delivery Worth A Worker's Life?" that either of these publications seriously consider the risk these precarious workers incur by continuing to uphold the "touchless economy."

The *NYT, WaPo*, and the *WSJ* began shifting their narratives about Amazon warehouse workers on March 30th and 31st, 2020 when several employees at Amazon, Instacart, and Whole Foods walked off the job in order to demand better health protections and hazard pay from their employers. Despite similar workers actions taking place throughout March, one of the reasons this story gained traction was due to the firing of Christian Smalls who worked as a process assistant at Amazons JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York. Yet, while discussing Smalls termination, none of the news outlets mentions his active involvement in initiating unionizing efforts in the JFK8 warehouse facility since 2018 (Blest, 2020). Considering Smalls was the only employee terminated after organizing this strike, the absence in reporting of his integral role in union organizing is peculiar.

In covering this story, the *NYT* was the only outlet to refer to Amazon warehouse workers actions as a strike with their headline reading, "Workers Strike Over Health Worries." Whereas, the *WSJ*'s headline stated, "Some Instacart and Amazon Workers Stay Home, Calling for More Pay in Coronavirus Pandemic; Coronavirus risks prompt walkouts, pay demands at delivery and retail companies," with the *WaPo* writing, "Workers protest at Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods for health protections and hazard pay." Although the *NYT* accurately reports these warehouse workers actions as a strike, they simultaneously weaken their choice of language by generalizing the reasoning behind the strike as an issue concerning "health worries." The *WaPo* and *WSJ,* while diluting the workers actions by using verbs such as "stay home", "walkout" or "protest," at least identify concrete reasons behind the strike.

The coverage from all three newspapers was remarkably similar so for the sake of brevity I will focus on two typical articles both published on March 31st: one by the *WaPo* the other by the *NYT*. Nitasha Tiku and Jay Greene's article published by the *WaPo*, "Workers protest at Instacart, Amazon and Whole Foods for health protections and hazard pay," introduces the issue by writing, "now they are conducting walkouts, strikes and sickouts to demand hazard pay and safety protections that match what they say is the high risk they take in showing up to work." Here, by engaging in notions of impartiality, Greene and Tiku employ Gitlin's first observable frame, the trivialization of the movement's actions, qualifying the risk these workers sustain by showing up to work with contestable language such as "what they say is the high risk..." By using this phrasing without substantiating the claims by conveying the observable risks these workers undertake, Greene and Tiku open up the workers experiences to critique or rejection. Here, we see what Knight and Dean (1982) observe in "Myth and the Structure of the News," that "not only is action reduced to "attitude" and emotion, but the causes for the change in attitude remain unexamined" (p. 151). Unsurprisingly, in the following sentences, Tiku and Greene report, "spokespeople for Amazon, Whole Foods and Instacart disputed the workers' claims, saying they are taking appropriate precautions to protect them." Before Tiku and Greene even discuss the issue at hand, the strikes, they have already undercut the workers' positions by questioning the validity of their claims by relying on corporate representatives (and engaging in Gitlin's sixth observable frame) to discredit the issues behind the strikes.

When discussing the strikes, Tiku and Greene rely on both Gitlin's fourth observable frame, criticizing or focusing on the number of people present, as well as reiterating Amazon's hiring plans. Tiku and Green state,

> About 50 workers walked out Monday, according to Chris Smalls, a worker at the warehouse who helped organize the action. Amazon, which is trying to hire 100,000 workers to address the crush of coronavirus-related orders, disputed that figure, as well as the complaints that it's not doing enough to protect workers. Only 15 employees participated in the demonstration out of 5,000 who work at the warehouse, Amazon spokeswoman Lisa Levandowski said in an emailed statement.

Although according to the headline this article supposedly concerns the protests occurring at three logistics companies, the article itself has called into question not only the conditions of work the employees endure but the size of the strikes as well. At the same time, this article carries out Parenti's fifth generalization, failing to discuss the effects failed strikes have on workers lives and the conditions of their workplaces. From this perspective, Tiku and Greene's execution of the news values of impartiality, neutrality, and balancing of the story serves to re-legitimize Amazon's role in the US economy and society (Gitlin, 2003; Hall, 1974, 1982; Cusion, et al, 2016). Greene and Tiku wait until the end of the article to counter Amazon's position while implying that perhaps the risk of working for Amazon isn't worth the dismal increases in wages workers were receiving. At the end of the article, Tiku and Greene include a quote from a Whole Foods worker from Wisconsin. The worker, who requested anonymity in the article, states "It really opened their eyes," he said. "I've seen a lot more team members say, 'You're right, they don't care about us. An extra $2 an hour isn't worth it.'" By leaving this statement about the shifting attitudes several workers have articulated regarding the low-value of their jobs, this important perspective is swamped by the larger uncritical framing employed throughout the story.

Finally, while the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* started (although belatedly) covering the growing labour actions at Amazon's facilities across the United States, the *NYT* published an op-ed by Greg Bensinger, who sits on the NYT editorial board, titled "We Need Amazon During the

Coronavirus. That's a Problem," on the same day they published their first article about the strikes. Within the op-ed, Bensinger writes, "While Amazon and Walmart deserve credit for preparing for a calamity such as the coronavirus pandemic, some of their ability to deliver during the crisis may come at the cost of employee protections… The competitive advantages of Amazon's meticulously constructed worldwide logistics network, built to shuttle nearly every imaginable item to customers in as little as an hour, are especially evident in this crisis." From this perspective, Bensinger is addressing the paradox between the US economy needing Amazon to remain open in order to circumvent further economic calamity alongside the increasingly dangerous working conditions found at Amazon warehouses. On the day the *NYT* finally covers the ongoing Amazon warehouse labour actions, they publish an op-ed illustrating that the strikes are important, but Amazon should stay open. That's a problem.

Bensinger concludes his editorial piece with, "Amazon and Walmart have offered critical delivery services during this crisis, but regulators and elected officials should not lose sight of the dangers of monopoly power falling into the hands of the fortunate few that survive the coronavirus fallout." Although Bensinger's opinion piece expounds on several of the criticisms of Amazon and other major retailers, he falls short of discussing any alternative options available which would limit Amazon's monopoly power. Bensinger may list the criticisms against the company, but he does not contextualize the company's monopoly power within the context of the very critiques he's mentioning. He also fails to contextualize Amazon's monopoly power within the context of neoliberal globalization as well. This op-ed, then, both engages in Parenti's fourth generalization, where the press highlights the impacts of the strikes rather than discussing the reasoning behind them, albeit in an alternative form; as well as inaugurates the third overarching narrative I found throughout the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour

unrest during COVID-19, the Amazon as Painful but Necessary frame. Because Bensinger refrained from commenting on the policy options available which would curtail and suppress Amazon's monopoly power, or criticizing the fact that Amazon was one of the few corporations allowed to continue operating throughout the pandemic (giving them an unparalleled advantage over smaller competitors), or even pointing to potential demands that both consumers and Amazon warehouse workers could unite behind to ensure warehouse workers do not come at the expense of Amazon's 'meticulously constructed worldwide logistics networks,' Bensinger's op-ed fails to portray a more equitable future. A future he's calling on elected officials and regulators to contend with. So far, then, the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest during COVID-19 upholds Gitlin's (2003) observation that, "content that starts out seeming destabilizing and threatening – a mass demonstration, a riot, a new style of political deviance – may thus end up confirming the inherent rightness and necessity of the core hegemonic principles. The same process operates after news of scandal or disaster" (p. 267).

*The Moment of Discovery*

According to Amazon, Christian Smalls was fired due to him violating "social distancing protocols" in the warehouse. He allegedly spoke with another worker who had recently been diagnosed with COVID-19. Yet, as William Stolz who works at an Amazon warehouse, notes, "they [Amazon] started enforcing social distancing, but also enforcing it as a pretext to target people who management didn't like. The main people I have seen who have gotten in serious trouble for it—and not just for a write-up, but a final written warning—are people who had disagreements with management. Using it forcefully against people who were organizing. Not just at my warehouse, but around the country" (Pottenger, 2020). Considering Smalls had been actively engaged in unionizing efforts within JFK8, it's unsurprising that Amazon would take

this opportunity to leverage and weaponize their COVID-19 social distancing policies (while refusing to implement additional health and safety changes within the warehouses themselves). Amazon's firing of Christian Smalls, as we will see, eventually produced the "discovery" moment for the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*, which briefly changed the orientation of their news coverage to include more overt criticisms of the company. This moment of discovery, which occurred between April 3rd through roughly April 21st, 2020 is the closest any of these newspapers of record came to producing a potential hegemonic rupture in their framing of the Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest during COVID-19. Thirty articles were published in total by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* during this phase marking the largest number of articles reported in the shortest period of time (eighteen days). This high concentration of articles published by these newspapers of record point to the temporary shift in their reporting where the labour unrest at Amazon warehouses was taken seriously.

However, the firing itself was not enough to produce this shift in coverage. The "event" which caught the attention of the wider public as well as these newspapers of record, instead, was a leaked memo released by *Vice* which outlined Amazon's public relations strategy of seeking to divert attention away from the unionizing efforts and growing labour unrest occurring at their facilities around the country (as well as in other countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain) (Gurly, 2020). Their strategy was to intentionally profile Christian Smalls. By emphasizing Smalls, Amazon would be able to localize their quickly developing labour issues to a single person in an attempt to distract both the media as well as the American people from the tensions building within the warehouses.

The labour actions of Amazon warehouse workers, in this case, were not enough to compel the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, or the *WSJ* to re-examine their coverage of Amazon. Instead, the event consisted

of a brief moment which unveiled Amazon's public relations strategy; an instant where a company whose operations largely occur behind closed doors unexpectedly encountered a moment of transparency. Perhaps one of the reasons why the leaked memo rather than the strikes produced an abrupt shift in narratives is due to the fact that the labour beat has largely vanished from the American press (Martin, 2019; McChesney, 2011, 2015; Mort, 1992; Kumar, 2001). If newspapers shifted their focus from labour to workplace lifestyle stories then growing labour unrest would sit outside the purview of these newspapers (Martin, 2019). Without a consistent labour beat, reporters would not have insight or connections to workers within various workplaces (Kendall, 2011; Basu, 2018). Or, perhaps, it makes sense that for newspapers who have become dependent and reliant on the public relations of companies to form their stories, a momentary slip of the company's mask is precisely what would catch these newspapers of record off guard. As Edward Herman remarks, "…the public relations industry has been able to manipulate press coverage of issues on behalf of corporate America" (2018, p. 52).

The memo was leaked on April 2nd, 2020, three days after Smalls was terminated by Amazon. The *WaPo* and the *NYT* covered the memo a day after it was leaked, on April 3rd, 2020. Due to this slight delay in their reporting on the memo, I started the moment of discovery period on the day the *NYT* and the *WaPo* discovered the story. The tone and focus of the *WaPo*'s and the *NYT*'s coverage differed quite substantially. While Jay Greene's article, "Top Amazon executive sought to divert focus to fired worker amid workplace safety criticism, email shows," foments more substantive critiques of Amazon, as can be seen by the headline, it concurrently waters down the labour actions taking place. Greene writes,

> Amazon's top legal executive suggested the company's senior leaders fend off workplace safety criticism by trying to turn the focus on an activist warehouse worker it had fired just days earlier, according to leaked notes from a meeting with top executives…The

> company fired Chris Smalls, a New York warehouse worker, on Monday after he complained to several media outlets, including *The Washington Post*, that Amazon had not done enough to protect its workforce during the coronavirus pandemic… In an email recounting a meeting with senior executives, including chief executive Jeff Bezos, executives discussed a strategy to shift the focus to Smalls… "He's not smart, or articulate, and to the extent the press wants to focus on us versus him, we will be in a much stronger PR position than simply explaining for the umpteenth time how we're trying to protect workers," Amazon General Counsel David Zapolsky wrote in an email first obtained by the news site *Vice*… Smalls called the firing "retaliation" for his speaking out against the company.

Here, we are reminded that "the news… is the account of the event, not something intrinsic in the event itself" (MacDougall, 1968, p. 12). Even when capturing what took place, Greene frames Smalls in an unsavoury light. By stating that Smalls "complained" to media outlets about Amazon's intentional failure to protect their workers, Greene, in a way, plays into Amazon's planned public relations strategy while disqualifying the dangerous work environments found across Amazon warehouses. After citing the alarming comments made by David Zapolsky about Smalls, comments which allude to the fact that there was more behind Smalls termination than Amazon was originally willing to publicly admit, Greene, yet again, belittles Smalls' firing by framing it in a way which questions whether or not his firing was retaliatory for his actions. In a moment of potential hegemonic rupture, the *WaPo*'s coverage seems unrelenting in its commitment to upholding a favourable image of Amazon.

The *NYT*, on the other hand, in Ginia Bellafonte's article (which is by far the most critical news article published by the *NYT* throughout COVID-19), "'We Didn't Sign Up for This': Amazon Workers on the Front Lines," chose a different tone when addressing this revelatory memo. In the article, Bellafonte writes,

> As if in the darkest children's fable ever told, the undisputed winner of the current plague turns out to be the man who already had everything, the king whose empire appears intent on consuming the entire map. This week Jeff Bezos, the richest man on earth, saw the

> year's first financial quarter close with Amazon stock up more than 5 percent, trading at $1,950 a share, during a period in which the Dow had its worst overall quarter since 1987.

Bellafonte is the first reporter to comment on the heaps of profits Bezos has expropriated from his workers during a single month of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, she carries on, addressing the working conditions at Amazon too. She writes,

> What awaits these workers? It would be easier to make peace with the company's crisis-fueled colonization of the marketplace if we could be assured that hourly workers were reaping big rewards given the risk of the jobs. But instead workers feel unsupported in the most fundamental ways… Not content merely to fire Mr. Smalls, executives planned to exploit him as part of a public-relations strategy meant to deflect attention away from safety issues.

Here, Bellafonte is explicitly illuminating the discrepancy between the rewards reaped by Amazon executives versus the conditions faced by Amazon warehouse workers. Unlike Greene, Bellafonte refers to Amazon's treatment of Smalls as exploitative. She directly identifies the objectives of Amazon's public relations strategy and how Smalls, a labour leader and organizer, was going to be used as mere fodder to buttress Amazon's corporate image. Later in the article, Bellafonte cites a letter heads of unions and political leaders sent to Bezos, saying,

> In a letter to Mr. Bezos, the labor leaders also addressed concerns that conditions at Amazon warehouses were unsafe: workers there were "reporting crowded spaces, a required rate of work that does not allow for proper sanitizing of work spaces, and empty containers meant to hold sanitizing wipes."

Despite the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*, reporting on COVID-19 and Amazon warehouse workers since March 11th, this is the first time either of these news outlets confront the realities of work at the warehouses where a reporter explicitly identifies the routine and speed of work enforced in Amazon's warehouse facilities as a barrier to enforcing COVID-19 health and safety measures. In this moment, it appears that as "oppositional groups and movements make claims

for coverage, reporters may change their images of their audience or even of the world, and, too their 'instincts' about what is 'newsworthy,' 'interesting,' or 'important.' These changes may be more or less subtle, more or less conscious: reporters may be influenced even as they resist overt pressures to report on an issue in this or that way" (Gitlin, 2003, p. 269). However, it's important to keep in mind that it took multiple weeks of Amazon workers striking, walking out, shutting warehouses down, as well as other labour actions, a leak, the New York Attorney General, Letitia James, and New York Mayor Bill de Blasio calling for an investigation into the wrongful termination of Christian Smalls, a multitude of labour leaders and politicians (including Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren) publicly criticizing Smalls firing, as well as Christian Smalls himself speaking to several media outlets for this temporary shift in coverage to occur.

Within this moment of discovery, the *NYT* published three news articles in a somewhat similar vein as Bellafonte's. The *NYT*, by far, produced the most critical coverage of Amazon during this period. The *WaPo*'s coverage, on the other hand, was mixed. The majority of the articles published by them during this period followed suite with Greene's initial coverage of the leaked memo while occasionally including a greater degree of critical analysis. The *WSJ* did not report on the leaked memo until an additional warehouse worker, Bashir Mohamed, was fired by Amazon for speaking out against the working conditions at the warehouses.

On April 14th, the *WSJ* published an article written by Sebastian Herrera, titled "Fired Amazon Warehouse Workers Accuse Company of Retaliation, Which It Denies; Employees say they were targeted for organizing; tech giant defends firings, safety measures at facilities." In the article, Herrera interviews several Amazon warehouse workers where they discuss the punishing environment found in the warehouses. Herrera writes,

> Amazon.com Inc. has fired at least three warehouse employees and reprimanded several others who say they were singled out after pushing for better working conditions during the coronavirus pandemic, a contention the company denies…As the nation's second-largest employer, Amazon has been subject to unionization efforts for years. Some groups and advocates supporting warehouse and delivery workers have seized on the coronavirus pandemic as a rallying moment. Amazon had about half a million U.S. employees before the health crisis hit, many of whom work in its warehouse and delivery network… Labor officials backing Amazon workers say the firings follow a pattern of efforts the company has made in the past to resist employee organizing to seek better conditions in warehouses.

Herrera's contextualization of the current workers strikes with Amazon warehouse workers long standing attempts at unionizing is important because it reveals that the issues Amazon warehouse workers are currently fighting against exist beyond the additional risks and threats imposed by COVID-19. Most previous coverage by these news outlets had minimized these worker actions by containing them solely within the context of health issues due to COVID-19. However, here we see Parenti's seventh generalization crop up as well where Amazon's coercive efforts to halt unionizing efforts are mentioned but are not developed or elaborated on. What sort of tactics has Amazon used to "resist employee organizing"? How have they "resisted" these efforts? What does this pattern of resistance mean for currently striking workers? Considering Amazon's current tactic, weaponizing their COVID-19 policies to wrongfully terminate employees who are organizing, these are questions Herrera could have expanded upon in his article to further contextualize the difficulty warehouse workers have faced when attempting to "seek better conditions in warehouses."

However, the strength of this article comes from Herrera's interviews. He writes,

> Samir Qaisar, who sorts packages at a delivery center in Chicago, said he and at least two other employees received official write-ups from Amazon in recent days after protesting working conditions at the facility two weeks ago. Mr. Qaisar, 31, said that many other workers appear to violate the rule daily because their jobs often involve having to be in proximity to one another, but that the company hasn't reprimanded those workers…

> Brenda Aron, 47, who stows items at a facility near Fort Worth, Texas, said it took legal threats for Amazon to grant her sick leave after applying in late March, following orders from a doctor to self-quarantine. The company says it has allowed employees who show symptoms, test positive for the virus or are placed in self-quarantine to take two weeks of paid sick leave.

These interviews identify two important absences in the majority of the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest so far. First, by refraining from commenting on the nature of the work done at Amazon, reporters have been unable to develop sufficient critiques of Amazon's recently implemented health and safety policies. Second, up until this point, none of the news outlets have examined the implementation of the new health and safety policies, including the paid time off Amazon warehouse workers were allegedly able to receive. Each outlet, for the most part, simply parroted and championed Amazon for their announcement of these policies. By interviewing Amazon warehouse workers about Amazon's policies, Herrera is able to dig beneath the surface of Amazon's public statements. Brenda Aron's statements corroborate Dania Rajendra's findings in her chapter "The CEO Has No Clothes: Worker Leadership and Amazon's Failures During COVID-19." Rajendra writes, "as the company continued to tout its two weeks of pay in the case of diagnosis or quarantine, workers reported that, even with documentation, their claims were rejected" (2021, p. 263).

Yet, Herrera couldn't help but offset the interviews he included by reiterating Parenti's second generalization: highlighting the policies which reflect favourably on management. After illustrating the shallowness behind Amazon's public spokespeople's claims about the changes Amazon's implementing to ensure their workers are safe and protected, Herrera writes, "Amazon has significantly stepped up benefits for workers affected by the crisis, offering a raise of $2 an

hour through the end of April and unveiling plans to hire 175,000 people. The company also says it is supplying masks to all its facilities and has started daily temperature checks."

Herrera's uncritical inclusion of Amazon's additional COVID-19 safety proposals, such as daily temperature checks, again counters his previous reporting about the discrepancy between what Amazon is saying they are doing to ensure warehouses are safer versus what is actually being done. As Rejandra notes in her chapter about Amazon and COVID-19, "inside the facilities, executives announced they'd further automate the surveillance of the workers, promising disciplinary procedures—up to and including firing—for anyone caught violating newly mandated social distancing rules. This followed new policies mandating temperature checks" (2021, p. 266). Considering Amazon's appalling history of surveilling their workforce, Herrera's uncritical repeating of policies like this is in his article is distressing.

Here, we also see that the alternative public relations strategy Amazon began repeating after their previous plan, namely locating Smalls as the face of the labour unrest, was no longer available as it became clear that many other workers were also coming forward and publicly discussing the working conditions at Amazon warehouses. Instead, Amazon spokespeople began emphasizing how they were distributing masks to their workers (which they should have done at the onset of COVID-19). Soon they would distract reporters covering the labour unrest at Amazon warehouses by explaining their new COVID-19 venture: producing masks for the rest of the country as well as developing COVID-19 testing labs on site at warehouses. In moments of hegemonic rupture, as is seen by Herrera's article, the moment itself will likely be contained by the reporters need to balance the story, even if the method of balancing the story (i.e. repeating Amazon's claims about their positive changes in their workplaces) were questioned merely moments earlier.

Importantly, although Bellafonte and Herrera offer more substantive critiques of Amazon and the working conditions Amazon warehouse workers are forced to endure, both articles (and the rest of the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest too) fails to mention the reproductive assistance striking Amazon workers received from other unions and unionized workforces. As Sheri Davis-Faulkner and Marilyn Sneiderman reported, "Foundation, the AFL-CIO, and national labor networks like the National Domestic Workers Alliance, launched national fundraising efforts to support workers, especially those excluded from relief and protections. These collective efforts helped to quickly establish the Frontline Workers Fund, Worker Solidarity Fund, and the Coronavirus Care Fund to support workers most in need" (2020, p. 85). This absence in the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage fits within Parenti's sixth generalization where the press either downplays or outright ignores the reproductive assistance and mutual support provided to workers by other unions, organizations, families of workers, etc.

There is another article published during this period that is worth mentioning. Keanga Yamata-Taylor, a professor at Yale University, opinion piece, titled, "Are We at the Start of a New Protest Movement?" which was published by the *NYT* on April 13, 2020. Yamata-Taylor's op-ed, while briefly mentioning Amazon warehouse workers, speaks to the growing sentiment found across workplaces in the United States. As mentioned prior, wildcat strikes began occurring in multiple industries around the country. Yamata-Taylor's piece connects this period of labour unrest with the lack of government assistance available for workers, the erosion of workers protections that have been occurring for several decades, while concurrently attempting to mobilize readers by illustrating that through unity and strength, as well as community initiatives like mutual aid funds, mass mobilization efforts can produce changes to the fabric of American society. Yamata-Taylor's op-ed captures the relative openness of these news organizations to

possibly shifting their hegemonic frames and norms to include the transparent social, political, and economic problems made unavoidably palpable in recent months. This follows Raymond Williams assertions regarding the nature of hegemony: "above all we have to give an account (of hegemony) which allows for its elements of real and constant change. We have to emphasize that hegemony is not singular; indeed that its own internal structures are highly complex, and have continually to be renewed, recreated and defended; and by the same token, that they can be continually challenged and in certain respects modified" (1997, p. 135)

The fact that the *NYT*'s op-ed section samples writers, scholars, activists, as well as others who give voice to perspectives often missing in their news coverage fits within the role editorial pages play at newspapers. Editorials unlike news pieces are not obligated to work within institutionalized news values such as impartiality, objectivity, and neutrality. Because of this, the editorial pages often feature a wider range of voices, both conservative and progressive, which speak to budding sentiments found within contemporary American society.

However, as we will see in the upcoming section, when new meanings, frames, or narratives emerge challenging established values and beliefs, it doesn't take long before established institutions, such as the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ,* begin incorporating them into their fold. This incorporation serves to dilute, weaken, and contain given moments which carry the capacity to challenge the central hegemonic values upheld by established institutions. As Williams attests, "… it is often a very narrow line, in reality, between alternative and oppositional" (1997, p. 138).

*Amazon as Painful but Necessary*

The (relatively) critical coverage of Amazon during the "moment of discovery" was quickly followed by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s attempts to seemingly contain, or incorporate, a

germinating labour movement. This incorporation is noticeable in two ways. First, the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest began petering out. During the moment of discovery, which took place over a period of eighteen days (April 3rd to April 21st), thirty articles were published in total by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*. During the period of incorporation (April 23rd to May 29th), when the "Amazon as painful but necessary" frame emerged (although, as noted before, this sentiment was imbued in early coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest), thirty-one articles were published over a series of thirty-seven days, approximately two times the length of "the moment of discovery". While critics may retort that during the moment of discovery Amazon warehouse workers were actively engaging in public labour struggles with Amazon, this was true during the Amazon as painful but necessary period as well. Furthermore, the temporary policies Amazon put in place at the beginning of the pandemic, including two weeks paid sick leave on top of unlimited unpaid sick leave, were soon coming to an end. This meant that the "benefits" Amazon warehouse workers received to offset the dangers imposed by COVID-19 would soon be unavailable which subsequently amplified the precarious position of Amazon warehouse workers.

Secondly, the moment of discovery should also be read as a brief period in which Amazon had to rejig their public relations strategy after their initial plan, singling out Christian Smalls, had failed. During the moment of discovery, reporters included Amazon warehouse workers more consistently than before. The more reporters spoke to Amazon warehouse workers, the stronger the criticisms were against Amazon. Unfortunately, after the moment of discovery, the number of oppositional voices diminished. Instead, following Hall (and Gitlin's sixth observable frame), the primary definers largely re-emerged as Amazon's corporate representatives. Although this

next period of coverage contained some criticisms of Amazon, it fell short of the coverage that was published during the moment of discovery.

This change in coverage, however, follows Gitlin's assertions that, after a moment is labeled an event by a news organization, "extending the news story would entail hard and unaccustomed work, outside normal newsgathering routines, going beyond the given scene, the given press conference, and the given press release… In general, then, a single story [in this case, building labour tensions within Amazon's workforce] – provoked by a single event [the leaked memo]– projects on a single field" (2003, p. 35). In other words, if the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* were to maintain the level of criticism found more frequently during the moment of discovery, reporters would have to move beyond institutionalized news values such as relying on sources deemed "credible" by news institutions or depending on notions of impartiality, objectivity, and neutrality as a means to balance the story. As Hall notes, "by operating balance within a given structure, [the media] tacitly maintains the prevailing definition of the political order. In one and the same moment, it expresses and contains conflict. It reproduces unwittingly the structure of institutionalized class conflicts on which the system depends" (1974, p. 22). This is precisely what the Amazon as painful but necessary period of coverage achieves.

The Amazon as painful but necessary period was inaugurated by Karen Weise's article, "Bezos Takes Back the Wheel," which was published by the *NYT* on April 23, 2020. Already, the headline of the article suggests that order will finally be restored at Amazon now that Bezos has re-taken the reins of the company. Weise relied entirely on either interviews with representatives of Amazon or blog posts self-published by Amazon (including one written by Bezos) throughout the story. Weise writes,

> After years of working almost exclusively on long-term projects and pushing day-to-day management to his deputies, Mr. Bezos, 56, has turned back to the here-and-now problems facing Amazon, the company said, as the giant retailer grapples with a surge of demand, labor unrest and supply chain challenges brought on by the coronavirus… He is holding daily calls to help make decisions about inventory and testing, as well as how and when -- down to the minute -- Amazon responds to public criticism… Mr. Bezos has been "incredibly focused on this and is participating in, and driving, our leadership meetings" for the response, Jay Carney, the company's senior vice president for corporate affairs, said in a March 31 interview.

The image invoked by these passages is that of a distant leader returning to restore order and prosperity to a company in crisis. The crisis in this case, however, does not concern profitability but rather addresses damage done to Amazon's public image. The sentiment expressed in the article so far, however, is that part of the reason as to why Amazon was facing a myriad of challenges is due to the fact that the COVID-19 crisis was too substantial for the company to handle without Bezos's direct supervision. Now, with Bezos returning to his corporate throne, normalcy is around the corner.

The article continues,

> Mr. Bezos helped decide which features to remove from the Amazon website to reduce customer demand, such as burying its popular page promoting daily deals, one of the people said. He also approved delaying Prime Day, the company's summer shopping extravaganza…. Still, workers and lawmakers increasingly called for more precautions at the warehouses. On March 21, Mr. Bezos sent a rare letter to all of Amazon's employees, which the company immediately posted on its blog. He said the company had ordered millions of face masks for workers, though few of those orders had been filled. Mr. Inslee said in an interview in late March that Mr. Bezos had focused on the issue of vastly increasing testing for the coronavirus in the state and country. "How do we get to a point where tests are available on demand," Mr. Carney said about Mr. Bezos' thinking, "where results are as close to instant as possible?" That would let Amazon and other employers identify and quickly "isolate places where there are potential outbreaks and then defeat this," Mr. Carney said.

Weise presents Bezos as the person behind what she considers to be substantial changes within Amazon to ease the pressures produced by COVID-19, such as limiting items for sale on their

website, Amazon.com, as well as postponing the biggest event of Amazon's calendar year, Prime Day. Although Weise refers to Bezos wealth increase since COVID-19 began, she does not contextualize Bezos's alleged decision to postpone Prime Day within the larger background of Amazon earning unprecedented profits over the first few months of COVID-19. Yet, as the Amazon warehouse worker William Stolz remarks, Amazon was "determined to stay open to scoop up a lot of the market share from people who were buying online in a frenzy in early April. It was busier than Christmas at my warehouse" (Pottenger, 2020). Postponing Prime Day during a period of time where every day feels like Prime Day does not seem to be as important a decision as Weise presents it to be. As Huws remarks, "Bezos, CEO of Amazon, was the greatest winner [during COVID-19] in absolute terms, with a growth of $43.8 billion over the three-month period [which] comes as little surprise given the enormous growth in online shopping" (2020, p. 6).

Weise's praise of Bezos's decision to limit the types of goods and products sold on Amazon's e-commerce platform is also subject to scrutiny. As Dania Rejandra notes,

> Amazon's big international pronouncements that it would 'slow' or 'suspend' the shipping of non-essential goods, ostensibly to protect workers, seem far more focused on market share and control. French inspectors, American workers, and others all said, simply, it didn't happen. Non-essential goods continued to move. What did happen was that Amazon has arbitrarily changed the rules about what shipments they would accept from third parties – cutting off the ability of those people to get their goods to market, because their goods are 'fulfilled by Amazon' (2021, p. 268).

If Weise had dug beneath the surface, a surface constructed and provided by Bezos and Amazon's corporate team themselves, by asking Amazon warehouse workers if the transport and sale of goods really were limited to essentials, or even by speaking to third-party sellers about the impact of Amazon's policy on their business, she may have developed a more substantive

article commenting on Bezos's role at Amazon during COVID-19. Moreover, in both passages we see the new public relations strategy employed by Amazon, their focus on testing and mask production reiterated as a way to discount or minimize the criticisms Amazon has repeatedly received regarding warehouse conditions.

Weise concludes the article writing,

> On April 8, when the virus had spread to more than 50 Amazon facilities, Mr. Bezos made a surprise visit to a Whole Foods store and an Amazon warehouse, both near Dallas, which the company filmed. Afterward, he asked other executives why masks, which the company had finally obtained, weren't being required, according to a person involved in the response. A few days later, Amazon told its warehouse workers that they had to wear masks.

This uncritical vaunting of Bezos's trip to a warehouse positions this action not as a media spectacle intended to misdirect people away from the labour issues within the warehouses but as a moment conveying Bezos's leadership capacity. The meaning implied with Weise's final sentences is that without Bezos's "surprise" visit to Amazon owned properties, workers may not have received much needed masks. Considering this article was published over a month into the pandemic with several significant labour actions occurring simultaneously, the celebratory tone of Weise's article is misplaced. This article, however, illustrates the switch in coverage between Ginia Bellafonte's on April 3rd, only twenty days before the publication of this article.

The containment of counter-hegemonic values is even clearer in the *NYT*'s and the *WaPo*'s coverage of subsequent strikes organized by Amazon warehouse workers and other logistics companies on May 1st, 2020 also known as May Day or International Workers Day. The WaPo was the only news outlet of the three to cover the strike on the day it took place. The *NYT* waited until May 12th to mention it whereas the *WSJ* failed to report on the event entirely. The little

coverage these workers initiatives received reveals the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s dwindling interest in covering the ongoing story of labour unrest at Amazon warehouses.

On May 1st, the *WaPo* published Rachel Lerman and Nitasha Tiku's article titled, "Amazon, Instacart workers launch May Day strike to protest treatment during the coronavirus pandemic." Since Lerman and Tiku are discussing several companies striking at the same time, I will only be discussing their inclusion of Amazon warehouse workers. They write,

> Warehouse workers and grocery employees at Amazon and its subsidiary Whole Foods and gig workers for Instacart and Target-owned Shipt banded together for the protest on May Day, or International Workers Day. The workers — whose jobs have become ever more critical during the age of coronavirus quarantines and stay-at-home orders — called for more personal protective equipment, professional cleaning services and hazard pay from their employers… "It was surreal," said Christian Smalls, an organizer of the Staten Island protests, on his way to a second stop at the governor's office. "I see heroes — nurses and doctors were out there, transit workers." Amazon, Target, Shipt and Whole Foods said their operations were not interrupted. It was not immediately clear how many people participated, although the companies said it was a small number… Those groups of workers have each previously waged individual protests since March, with what companies described as little impact on operations. But Friday marks the first time that workers classified as essential combined their efforts.

These passages illustrate several attempts at containing the impact of the May Day strikes. Despite Lerman and Tiku correctly identifying the collective effort of workers deemed essential combining their labour power by concurrently striking (which carries the possibility of workers across the country uniting under a common identity fighting for mutual interests and reasonings), the strikes themselves were undermined by the questioning of both their size and impact. Here, we see Gitlin's fourth observable frame, the criticizing or focusing on the number of people present, as well as his fifth observable frame, criticizing or focusing on the ineffectiveness of the movement and/or labour actions. By employing Gitlin's fourth and fifth observable frame, Lerman and Tiku also engage in Gitlin's third observable frame: marginalizing the protests and

workers. Yet, in this case, Lerman and Tiku refrain from challenging the statements about the ineffectiveness of the strikes put forward by Amazon, Target, Shipt, and Whole Foods. Once again, by failing to challenge the claims of corporate representatives, Lerman and Tiku are unable to represent the nature of the strike, how strikes could affect production and distribution at Amazon (and other corporations), as well as what forms of labour actions are needed to directly challenge these corporations.

As Grace Blakeley observes in her paper 'The Big Tech Monopolies and the State,' "as the global workforce is exploited by an ever-shrinking number of ever-growing monopolies, the potential for, and impact of, worker organizing increases… The concentration of economic activity in a small number of large firms means that such strike action would ultimately prove highly effective – the impact of shutting down Amazon for just a day would be huge" (2021, p. 108). Labour historian Kim Moody confirms Blakeley's observations in his chapter, "Amazon: Context, Structure, and Vulnerability." Moody identifies Amazon as the largest logistics company in North America where its objective of efficiently moving goods quickly has translated into "enormous pressures on the workers in its expanding network of sortation and fulfilment centers, Prime Now hubs, delivery stations, and data centers, as well as those working in the many forms of transportation that connect these and the ultimate customers" (2021, p. 39). Amazon, then, is dependent upon its ability to transport large volumes of goods to given destinations in a short period of time in order to maintain their competitive advantage. From this perspective, any disruptions to their production process or supply chain has the potential to create major problems for Amazon. As Moody states, "this increases what economist Howard Botwinick has called the employer's 'cost of obstruction' – that is, the cost to employers who attempt to block or defeat workers' actions. Clearly, high fixed costs raise this 'cost of

obstruction' significantly for Amazon, strengthening the hand of workers who dare to take full-scale action" (2021, p. 49).

From this perspective, the claims espoused by Amazon's corporate representatives work to obscure the fact that small numbers of employees are necessary in order to stall, disrupt, or stop Amazon's production and distribution capacities. Short strikes are a tactic that Amazon warehouse workers can use to create major obstacles for Amazon. Lerman and Tiku's uncritical repetition of these corporate representatives' claims serves to distract both readers and workers around the country from recognizing the real potential seemingly small labour actions can have on an enormous company like Amazon.

Considering the overtly critical coverage published by the *NYT* during Amazon warehouse workers labour actions in early April, it is surprising that the *NYT* barely commented on another important moment in Amazon warehouse workers labour struggle. Noam Scheiber's article published on May 12th, 2020, titled "Reopening Prompts New Agitation Over Workers Virus Exposure" couches Amazon's May Day strike within a general concern that the American economy might be opening too quickly.

Scheiber minorly references the May Day Strike, writing,

> Some workers at Amazon, who also joined the May Day protests, said they were upset over the end of the company's policy of unlimited unpaid time off, which many had used to avoid exposure inside warehouses… Nationally, participants in the May Day protests said they had communicated through a group on the encrypted messaging app Telegram that brought together workers and organizers at Instacart, Whole Foods, Amazon and FedEx. Among them was Christian Smalls, who was fired from his job at an Amazon warehouse in Staten Island after leading a protest there in late March. Amazon said Mr. Smalls had violated its social distancing rules.

So far, Scheiber's reporting seems fairly standard where he's repeating information previously disclosed in earlier articles. Similar to the *WaPo* article, Christian Smalls is the only Amazon warehouse worker either spoken to or mentioned by name. This inclusion is interesting considering Amazon's original public relations strategy was to highlight and isolate Smalls as the face of the unionizing efforts and labour unrest occurring within Amazon. While the framing of Smalls sits outside the negative associations Amazon was hoping to attach to him (i.e. Smalls being inarticulate and 'not smart'), he nonetheless is positioned as the face of Amazon warehouse workers. Scheiber continues,

> But there appear to be tactical differences among workers, even at the same company. A Chicago-based group of Amazon workers, DCH1 Amazonians United, released a statement that questioned whether the May Day walkout was the best approach… "Calling for a general strike is easy — organizing one is not," the statement said. "Before taking action we've got to get organized."

While dissension amongst workers is likely to occur, emphasizing this dissension (while also engaging in Gitlin's second observable frame) in a relatively short article published almost two weeks after the strike took place is odd. This inclusion is especially odd given that this is the only time any of the articles have referenced Amazonians United. Both this article and the *WaPo*'s work in tandem to discredit the courageous initiatives led by Amazon warehouse workers in conjunction with other "essential workers" in similar industries. As Parenti remarks, "the basic distortions in the media are not innocent errors, for they are not random; rather they move in the same overall direction again and again, favoring management over labour, corporatism over anticorporatism, the affluent over the poor, private enterprise over socialism" (1986, p. 10).

The *WSJ* was relatively quiet during this period of coverage. They did, however, publish an opinion piece by Sean Higgins, a research fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, on May 11th 2020 titled, "Amazon's Pandemic Success Story; Progressives and their union allies trash the company, but it keeps delivering and hiring." This supportive op-ed about Amazon is interesting for two reasons: the *WSJ*'s total lack of reporting on the May Day strikes as well as the article's encapsulation of the growing sentiment that maybe Amazon is not as bad as they seem that has recently been cropping up repeatedly in the coverage of Amazon.

Higgins writes,

> There's one bright spot in the dismal pandemic economy. Amazon is trying something that no company has attempted before: supplying the essential needs of 325 million Americans largely confined to their homes during a pandemic, while keeping its own workforce of more than 500,000 people safe. Yet some politicians are trying to make it a scapegoat…. Unions like the United Food and Commercial Workers have sought to organize Amazon's warehouses for years. They're taking advantage of the renewed public focus on the company amid the pandemic to try again.

Higgins unwavering support of Amazon as well as his outright hostility towards anyone criticizing the company comes at a moment when coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest is shrinking, the additional COVID-19 measures available for workers are ending, while COVID-19 is vastly spreading. This is the first time an article has engaged in Parenti's first generalization where criticisms against Amazon, let alone mentioning the strikes and ongoing labour unrest, is presented as senseless and unnecessary. Here, Higgins presents well-known Unions (who are adjacent to Amazon warehouse workers labour struggles) as suspicious, self-interested actors hoping to exploit a current crisis in order to salvage the remaining power they have in the American economy and workforce.

Instead of engaging in a discussion about the labour actions that had been taking place around the country for over two months, Higgins wrongfully writes, “Amazon's recent problems likely stemmed from overstaffing in an attempt to meet increased demand.” In fact, as has been mentioned in previous articles, despite the ceaseless mentions of Amazon’s hiring plans, the warehouses had been facing employee shortages throughout the pandemic. Interestingly, few of the articles addressed the droves of workers abstaining from showing up to work as a form of worker protest. In a moment where unemployment rates were hitting unprecedented heights, Amazon, the “bright spot in the dismal pandemic economy,” was simply unable to fill both their newly developed vacancies as well as recent vacancies resulting from workers staying home. In a powerful declarative statement Higgins writes, “But if ever there was an occasion to root for a particular business, this is the time and Amazon the company.” Higgin’s message is resoundingly clear: we need Amazon right now and that is all that matters.

There are two additional op-eds both published by the *NYT* that deserve mentioning during this period. Neither the *WaPo* nor the *WSJ* published op-eds in a similar vein as the ones found in the *NYT*. Throughout both the moment of discovery as well as the Amazon as painful but necessary periods, the *NYT* consistently produced more critical coverage of Amazon warehouse workers’ struggles than the *WaPo* and the *WSJ*. Although, in the Amazon as painful but necessary phase, critical coverage of Amazon was often kept within the editorial pages.

The two progressive op-eds published in this period are: Keanga Yamata-Taylor’s second opinion piece, “The ‘American Way of Life’ is Shaping Up to Be a Battleground,” published on May 14th; as well as Courtenay Brown and Jordan Flowers op-ed, “We Work in an Amazon warehouse. We Didn’t Sign Up to Be Heroes,” published on May 29th. Both of these editorial

pieces provide the most critical coverage of the social, political, and economic issues affecting American society during this period of coverage.

As Yamata-Taylor writes,

> From Amazon warehouse workers to striking sanitation workers in New Orleans, there are limits to what ordinary people are willing to endure to secure their employers' bottom line. Resistance to oppression and exploitation is a familiar experience for millions of workers in this country. And when workers have not found justice or relief in mainstream politics, they have turned to more combative ways of mobilizing to secure it…Part of the "American way of life" for at least some of these elected officials is keeping workers just poor enough to ensure that the "essential" work force shows up each day. In place of decent wages, hazard pay, robust distribution of personal protective equipment and the simplest guarantees of health and safety, these lawmakers use the threat of starvation and homelessness to keep the work force intact.

Similarly, Brown and Flowers remark,

> While Amazon may glorify its workers with sentimental commercials, thanking them for their heroic bravery, it has also rolled back some policies designed to keep those very workers safe during this pandemic. And on June 1, it's getting rid of hazard pay too, even though its facilities continue to see outbreaks of the coronavirus.

It is clear then that during this period of coverage the editorial pages (of the *NYT)* provided a more substantive analysis of the underlying tensions between labour and capital that were erupting in the United States. Yamata-Taylor points to the hopelessness workers across the country felt given the state of the US economy, their lives, and the work available to them and how they can, and have been, channelling that anger, frustration, and despair into disruptive actions like strikes. Brown and Flowers are commenting on the hypocritical attitude commonly found when discussing essential workers, reiterating what I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis. The 'essential' in essential workers actually means expendable, sacrificial, disposable. As Brown and Flowers note, the disposability of Amazon warehouse workers was ramping up precisely as the policies temporarily in place to help them were being scaled back.

Although the *NYT* editorial pieces offered important oppositional voices during a period of coverage when criticism of Amazon was waning, these pieces were not enough to change or alter the general trajectory of the *NYT*, *WaPo*, or *WSJ*'s deteriorating coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest at a moment in which scathing, critical, and oppositional coverage is needed more than ever. Here, it is important to recall Parenti's statements about the power of the media. Parenti remarks,

> If the press cannot mold our every opinion, it can frame the perceptual reality around which our opinions take shape. Here may lie the most important effect of the news media: they set the issue agenda for the rest of us, choosing what to emphasize and what to ignore or suppress, in effect, organizing much of our political world for us. The media may not always be able to tell us what to think, but they are strikingly successful in telling us what to think about (1986, p. 22).

If the role of the media is to help shape what we think about then what does it mean when the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest wanes as their working conditions rapidly worsen?

*Workers Protest as Hazy Memory*

In the final period of coverage examined in this thesis reporting on Amazon warehouse workers dropped precipitously. From the end of the Amazon as painful but necessary period, which concluded around May 29th until November 5th, 2020 only twenty-five articles were published in total by the *NYT*, *WaPo*, and *WSJ* collectively. Despite Amazon workers still being terminated for speaking out against the company (Ongweso, 2020), workers continuing to organize, plan, and execute workers actions around the country (Popular Resistance, 2020), the rescinding of all benefits that Amazon temporarily gave to their workers while pulling in massive profits, as well as labour rights groups, like the Athena Coalition, publicizing and advocating against Amazon's

rampant surveillance tactics employed in warehouses (Ongweso, 2020), none of these stories were picked up by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*. It seems that Amazon warehouse workers largely dropped off the radar of these news outlets.

There are a few stories the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* did pick up on that are notable. On July 30th, the NYT's editorial desk published an opinion piece titled "Let Amazon Workers Unionize." While the sentiment of the article is useful, the time they published the piece is peculiar. Publishing a politically relevant op-ed after minimally covering the May Day strikes followed by a slump in reporting on the warehouse workers labour actions (which subsequently curtails labour issues at Amazon as a topic on their readers minds) seems to undercut any effect this op-ed could have had if the editorial desk at the *NYT* took a public stance during the height of their coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest.

Within the editorial itself, the editorial desk sites the rolling back of the COVID-19 policies implemented to help workers even though their workload remained high. The piece mentions the labour strikes and other labour actions Amazon warehouse workers in European countries with stronger labour laws, such as France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, have organized to fight for better working conditions within the warehouses. The authors even refer to the unlawful firings of both warehouse workers and white-collar workers who actively spoke out against the treatment of warehouse workers. The editorial desk cites these developments as evidence that Amazon workers have the right to unionize. While the editorial desk's support of the ongoing unionizing efforts at Amazon is a step in the right direction, one still begs the question: why did they wait so long to make this public declaration?

If the *NYT* editorial team supported Amazon workers fight to unionize why are they failing to continue covering their initiatives? Why has their previous coverage of Amazon warehouse workers strikes been episodic and muddled in their support? If, what Mark Duzic and Adolph Reed Jr (2014) suggest is true, that the left will only be able to challenge corporate power and capitalist hegemony if a fluid and dynamic labour movement develops, why didn't the *NYT* editorial team provide overwhelming support for the moments in which a substantive labour movement was in the process of developing? Perhaps the answer is found in Duzic and Reed Jr's statement that, "such appeals have to be projected through the corporate news and public information industry, which will never give serious left critiques or agendas fair hearing" (2014, p. 352). Although the *NYT* is providing support for Amazon warehouse workers unionizing efforts, which perhaps points to the budding strength of the embryonic labour movement currently developing, they wait until the matter is no longer politically relevant to them (and, consequently, their readers) to address important issues foundational to the development of a labour movement: American workers right to unionize.

After the *NYT*'s editorial desks' opinion piece its coverage of Amazon warehouse workers dropped substantially with only a few articles cropping up each month touching upon the issues illuminated in their editorial. On October 1st, 2020 Karen Weise published a story titled, "Almost 20,000 frontline Amazon workers have been infected, the company says." Within this short article (less than two hundred words) Weise writes, "the company faced criticism from its workers and from lawmakers about its safety protocols, particularly in the spring, as the country locked down but Amazon remained open as an essential business. Amazon said it did its best to introduce safety measures while serving a critical need for customers." The discrepancy in tone between this article and the editorial published a few months earlier is staggering. Here, Weise's

article serves as prime example of the *NYT* version of 'objectivity' or 'impartiality' in action—on the one hand, she mentions the criticisms vocalized by workers, while on the other she reiterates Amazon's corporate spin.

Within the article, Weise also refers back to the sentiment found throughout the Amazon as painful but necessary period as well. Thousands of Amazon workers may have contracted the COVID-19 virus, but Amazon, as an essential business, is necessary for consumers. The initiatives and efforts made by Amazon warehouse workers throughout COVID-19 were reduced to the company "facing criticism." The strikes, protests, and other labour actions Amazon workers led, and continued leading at the time of Weise's article, are erased through nominalization. Indeed, their ongoing labour struggle is concealed behind Weise's vague utterances regarding the criticism Amazon received about their 'safety protocols."

The final article worth mentioning during this period of coverage is Jay Greene's "Amazon now employs more than 1 million people," published by the *WaPo* on October 29th. This article reflects a similar sentiment found both in Weise's previous article as well as the majority of the pieces published during this period. Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest is relegated to a criticism the company faced in the past. Albeit, in this article, the criticisms were "fierce." Yet, where this article diverges from Weise is its rearticulation of Amazon's hiring plans. According to Brian Olsavsky, Amazon's 'finance chief' (who, might I add, is the only person interviewed in this article), Amazon's employment numbers have hit a record high.

However, what is more interesting and revelatory about this article can be found in the following passage. Greene writes, "The company has also grown its fulfillment capacity — the collection of warehouses, delivery stations and drivers it uses to get packages to customers — by 50

percent this year, Olsavsky said." Throughout COVID-19, while workers were demonstrating, striking, and rallying the public behind the rampant exploitation and health dangers found across *all* warehouses in the United States, Amazon was busily expanding their empire. Interestingly, this is the only time Amazon's expansion is articulated by the *WSJ*, the *WaPo*, or the *NYT* outside of announcing Amazon's hiring plans. Now that these news outlets have conveniently forgotten the labour actions of Amazon warehouse workers alongside growing concerns about Amazon's monopoly power, Amazon is free to announce their heightened grip on the American economy and consumers. It appears then that the persistent announcements of Amazon's hiring plans outlast most considerations about the workplaces these new hires will spend a substantial portion of their time in. The quality of workers lives and working conditions, in the case of the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest, simply means less than Amazon being open for business.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the *NYT,* the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ* largely covered Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest as generalized and disparate events or moments is precisely because labour news is not considered within the realm of major news and is therefore covered sporadically and episodically (Kumar, 2001). Just as Gitlin found in his study of the news coverage of the New Left Student Movement, "the overall effect of media coverage was blurred and contradictory; there was not a single voice" (2003, p. 29). While disparate, alternative, and oppositional voices were portrayed by the *WaPo*, the *NYT*, and the *WSJ*, they occurred infrequently. Throughout the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest, the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ,* as Gitlin remarks, were "far from mirrors passively reflecting facts found in the real world. The facts reported were out there in the real world, true; out there *among others* (emphasis in original)" (p. 29).

It is here where we return to the issue of the media selecting the events, phenomena, facts, and moments they consider important for the story. Or, in other words, we return to issue of how the media frames their stories. Through the process of selection, as we have seen throughout this chapter, the media concurrently rejects, discards, or excludes additional information. Information that often carries the capacity to change the framing of the story. This is why, as Raymond Williams reminds us, "hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; our assignments of energy, our ordinary understanding of the nature of [humans] and of [their] world. It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming" (1997, p. 135). The occasional disparate opinions or voices featured in the *WaPo*, the *NYT*, or the *WSJ* are certainly not enough to provoke, let alone sustain, a hegemonic rupture from previous hegemonic practices and expectations. Although, to the extent that hegemonic shifts or ruptures are taking place, as we have seen, will often be refracted in these newspapers of record. Opinion pieces such as the *NYT* editorial desk supporting Amazon workers unionizing efforts may not represent a hegemonic rupture, but it is perhaps a sign that such ruptures are (at least incipiently) building elsewhere.

Overall, the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers throughout COVID-19 works to reaffirm the prevailing definition of the political and economic order (Hall, 1974). Whether this was the intention of the news outlets in question, the reporters referenced, or the writers behind the aforementioned editorials is of little concern. What matters, as Gitlin resoundingly reminds us, is meaning (2003). And the meaning behind the *WSJ*, the *WaPo*, and the *NYT*'s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest, at the most critical points of their coverage, is that of a reformist note. While there are very real problems with Amazon, during the COVID-19

pandemic, Amazon was integral to keeping the American economy afloat and American consumers safe from the COVID-19 virus.

# Chapter 4: (Re)Framing Amazon: Media Amnesia & the Active Forgetting by the Press

Over the course of the seven months of coverage I examined in the previous chapter, the *WSJ*, the *WaPo*, and the *NYT* seemed to be actively forgetting the discussions, arguments, and criticisms waged against Amazon by reporters from these very outlets as time elapsed. Near the end of the period of coverage which this thesis examines, the labour unrest organized by Amazon warehouse workers was relegated to an issue concerning the past despite the exacerbation rather than the resolution of the issues and reasonings behind Amazon warehouse workers strikes, walk-offs, and other labour actions. In some cases, Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest appeared to be erased from the news outlets recent memory entirely.

What is even more alarming is that when compared to the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (from August 2019 until early March 2020) it seemed as if the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* had disremembered their own pre-pandemic reporting as well. The labour unrest at Amazon warehouses was more often than not presented as disconnected from earlier labour struggles or labour issues at Amazon which had been reported on by these very news outlets shortly before the pandemic occurred. It appeared as if the media was dynamically participating in the re-writing of the history of the conflict between Amazon and Amazon's workers. Independent writer and scholar Laura Basu, in her book *Media Amnesia: Rewriting the Economic Crisis* (2018), identifies the tendency of the dominant media to actively forget their recent coverage as a form of media amnesia. Media amnesia, according to Basu, speaks to the moments in which crisis, phenomena, or events, are reframed where "certain information is forgotten and other information is added, so that the crisis narrative is fluid,

malleable, and difficult to grasp in its entirety" creating what Basu refers to as a "neoliberal groundhog day" (2018, p. 2). The crisis Basu addresses in her book is the 2007/8 global financial crisis.

Rather than perceiving media amnesia as an accidental phenomenon, Basu argues that media amnesia works to legitimize policies and actors who are responsible for the original crisis in question (2018). Through the media actively disremembering their own reporting, the solutions they proposed and discussed regarding the global financial crisis (which was brought on by neoliberalist policies) was the intensification and expansion of neoliberalism (Basu, 2018). This circuitous thinking produced through the process of media amnesia, where the solution to a crisis is rooted in the crisis's origins, is partly why Basu describes media amnesia as a neoliberal groundhog day. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a financial crisis on a similar scale as the 2007/8 financial crash and, perhaps unsurprisingly, the solutions proposed and legislated to contain this emergent crisis are eerily reminiscent of the solutions implemented to address the 2007/8 financial crisis. In fact, the CARES Act, one of the largest COVID relief bills signed into legislation "adopted the same structure of oversight that had been used for the 2008 bailout of the financial sector" (Brenner, 2020, p. 8). As mentioned in Chapter 3, Amazon has profited immensely from the COVID relief bills that were supposedly implemented to assist working people. Media amnesia plays an integral role in both limiting the discussions of what solutions to a given crisis are possible as well as priming the public to accept the further entrenchment of the very economic policies producing the crisis to begin with (Basu, 2018). Through the reframing of events, the causes of the problem are lost or reconfigured to suit the solutions advanced by media outlets, government officials, as well as corporate representatives. This chapter then asks: how has the media amnesia produced by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the

*WSJ* distorted and shaped the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers? What information has been lost in the reframing of events produced by these newspapers' active disremembering?

Basu finds three fundamental features within media coverage that produces and contributes to media amnesia: an absence of historical contextualization; "an overly narrow range of perspectives privileging elite views; and a lack of global context" (2018, p. 2). All three features were found in the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers. The lack of global context is evident in the fact that only ten out of the 143 articles analyzed for this thesis discussed Amazon globally, with the majority of those ten articles focusing on Amazon workers' resistance in France during COVID-19. While reporting on the global scale of the labour unrest Amazon is currently facing is crucial to understanding the company's labour politics, the global context in which Amazon operates remained a peripheral topic in news reporting. Amazon is a transnational corporation whose development and unprecedented prosperity is always already situated within the global context of neoliberalism and globalization. Amazon has warehouses, sorting facilities, data centers, as well as delivery services throughout Europe, Asia, North America, as well as Latin America, and, as illustrated by the few articles touching upon Amazon's labour struggle in France, Amazon warehouse workers' labour unrest has been and continues to be a global phenomenon. While addressing Amazon's global contexts is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is clear that reporting in the US fails to address these global issues. The two other characteristics contributing to media amnesia, namely the lack of historical context as well as the privileging of a narrow range of elite perspectives (what Stuart Hall calls the media's dependency on primary definers) require a more detailed analysis.

In a broad sense, media amnesia is inextricably linked to capitalism and the economic structuration of the news media. Actively forgetting, as Basu notes, is considered an important

characteristic of capitalism itself (2018). Rather than resolving the crises that are invariably produced by capitalist systems of production and distribution, the crises are moved around, re-arranged, and often metamorphize into larger problems and crises on a bigger plane. Basu remarks, "part of the reason capitalism creates amnesia is that the search for profit – capitalisms' driving force – leads to the constant speeding up of our experience of time: what David Harvey has called 'time-space compression'" (2018, p. 3). If amnesia is produced, in part, due to the acceleration of our experiences of time then media developments such as the 24/7 news cycle plays an integral role in the active forgetting by the press. The chronically endless updating of the news means that news stories are developing at a faster and faster rate. Yet, the development of a ceaseless news cycle does not necessarily result in the production of thorough and informative stories where stories are updated due to the emergence of important developments or details which fundamentally change the narratives and frames put forward by reporters. Instead, "new news doesn't only build on what came before it but can actually serve to erase or write over past coverage" (Basu, 2018, p. 4). This is precisely what occurred throughout the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers examined in this thesis. Media amnesia then works to continuously rewrite history as events are unfolding (Basu, 2018). More importantly, however, as Basu points out, the media "forgetting and rewriting [its own history] has had ideological outcomes coming to serve certain interests" (Basu, 2018, p. 4). As we saw in the final phase of coverage of Amazon warehouse workers during COVID-19 in the previous chapter, the ongoing labour unrest by Amazon warehouse workers was reduced to the company receiving "criticisms" at the beginning of the pandemic. By minimizing or actively disremembering the struggle between Amazon workers and Amazon headquarters, the news media's media amnesia reasserts Amazon's grip over the American economy and society.

This chapter is divided into three separate yet related components each addressing information that was lost in the re-framing of Amazon warehouse workers. The first section, Work at Amazon, outlines how the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* refrained from even moderately discussing what work at Amazon entails. Although these newspapers of record published three articles touching upon the work that is carried out at Amazon warehouses prior to the pandemic, throughout their coverage of Amazon warehouse workers during COVID-19 few articles discussed the nature of the work done at the warehouses, how their work is structured and surveilled, what workers endure throughout their shifts, as well as other pertinent details. The inclusion of these details would have helped contextualize the reasons as to why these workers were striking to begin with. The second section, Hiring and Employment, challenges how Amazon's hiring plans were framed while pointing to important information excluded from the coverage produced by these newspapers of record. The final section, Warehouse Visits, compares and contrasts the warehouse visits reported on by the *WaPo* and the *NYT* which occurred roughly a year apart from one another. This section illustrates the effects of media amnesia on the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers from pre-pandemic to pandemic reporting.

*Work at Amazon*

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the *NYT* published three notable articles which provided a substantive analysis of Amazon. Two of the articles discussed the effects produced by the construction and development of Amazon warehouses on the geographic location and communities who live near them, while one article addressed the issues pertaining to the nature of the work carried out by Amazon delivery drivers. Neither the *WaPo* nor the *WSJ* published critical coverage along the same lines as the *NYT* within the timeline this thesis explores prior to

COVID-19. The first article was co-published by the *NYT* and *ProPublica* (a non-profit investigative newsroom) on September 5th, 2019 and was titled "When Fast, Free Shipping Delivers Heartbreak." In this investigative piece, Patricia Callahan explores the effects of Amazon's "last mile delivery", which is considered the most costly and hazardous part of Amazon's distribution process, on contracted delivery drivers employed both directly and indirectly by Amazon. The piece discusses the human cost of fast and free delivery focusing largely on the high rate of accidents and deaths of pedestrians caused by Amazon delivery drivers rushing to deliver their package quotas within a given period of time in order to avoid punishment or termination. By addressing both the danger Amazon's relentless pursuit for profit by speeding up their delivery times has on citizens (and consumers) as well as the toll both these accidents and the punishing nature the work has on drivers, Callahan carefully constructs an image of Amazon as producing unnecessary harm and threats to citizens and their own workers for unnecessary services (i.e. single day delivery).

While questioning the necessity of Amazon's raison d'être (fast delivery), Callahan also outlines the ways in which Amazon deflects responsibility for any of the accidents or damages incurred by people and workers through their opaque employment practices, including relying on third-party 'independent contractors.' Two important outcomes, as reported by Callahan, are produced by Amazon's ubiquitous reliance on third party contractors. First, allegedly independent contractors are contractually responsible for all maintenance costs associated with their work, including liability for accidents. Meaning, when delivery drivers working for Amazon get into an accident (and the odds are high they will considering the rate of accidents for drivers working for Amazon is two times the industry standard), the drivers are held responsible for any costs incurred. Secondly, since Amazon contracts out a multitude of different types of drivers,

including companies with small fleets of drivers or individuals, it is difficult to trace each driver to Amazon explicitly. Amazon has leveraged this disassociated link to their delivery drivers as a way to shirk any responsibility for the injuries, accidents, deaths, or damages sustained while drivers are delivering Amazon packages. This sort of nuanced and investigative journalism did not occur at all throughout the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest during COVID-19.

Callahan's investigative article is the only piece produced in the months leading up to the global pandemic which focuses explicitly on the nature of work done by any workers associated with Amazon. Since Amazon warehouse workers were the focus of the labour unrest occurring at Amazon throughout COVID-19, an investigative article detailing the work that occurs within the warehouses would have contextualized both the difficulties of instituting much needed health and safety policies to limit the spread of COVID-19 as well as illuminated the plethora of reasons behind the warehouse workers' labour actions. The privileging of event over cause is one of the many news values which contributes to amnesiac reporting (Basu, 2018). Without contextualizing an emergent issue, the issues covered by the press appear as disconnected and disjointed creating a tremendous amount of space to disremember similar events and narratives published previously. Moreover, as Basu notes, "these news values are in turn connected to the market orientation of news providers. Their cost-cutting practices mean journalists are not necessarily knowledgeable about their subject, and don't have time to acquire knowledge. Revenue-raising leads, many claim, to extreme simplification and 'dumbing down'" (Franklin 1997; Basu, 2018, p. 78). So, despite news outlets like the *NYT* publishing a detailed article about one aspect of work at Amazon, the information generated from this article sits outside of later reporting of labour unrest at Amazon.

The second article critically examining the disruptive role Amazon's warehouses play in the lives of workers and residents was published on November 30th, 2019 and, written by Scott Shane, was titled "Prime Mover: How Amazon Wove Itself into the Life of an American City." While the article is mostly concerned with the effects of Amazon on the local economies of cities and towns near Amazon warehouses, such as Baltimore, there are a few excerpts in the article about Amazon warehouse work that are worth quoting. Shane writes,

> To the city's [Baltimore] southeast stand two mammoth Amazon warehouses, built with heavy government subsidies, operating on the sites of shuttered General Motors and Bethlehem Steel plants. Computers monitor workers during grueling 10-hour shifts, identifying slow performers for firing. Those on the floor earn $15.40 to $18 an hour, less than half of what their unionized predecessors made… The real boss [at Amazon warehouses] is data, however, as it is everywhere in Amazonland. Everything that happens is timed and measured in a way that efficiency experts of earlier generations could only dream about. If the computers say Ms. Taylor or other "associates" are too slow or sloppy, they're out. And if Mr. Virdi doesn't make his numbers, he'll be out too… In fact, an Amazon lawyer wrote to the N.L.R.B. [National Labour Relations Board] last year, it had fired "hundreds of other employees" at the Baltimore warehouse for failing to make their numbers. The letter, obtained by *The Verge*, listed more than 800 workers fired in the previous year, but the company now says the correct number was 309.

First, Shane's wage comparison between Amazon warehouse workers and previously unionized workers points to the increased poverty of warehouse workers since Amazon took over General Motors and Bethlehem Steel's vacant properties. More importantly, Shane indirectly illustrates the impact of neoliberalism on both the livelihoods of American workers as well illustrating how neoliberalism enabled Amazon's profitability. Second, Shane mentions how the warehouses were constructed by government subsidies. By including this, Shane points to the role the neoliberal state plays in allocating resources to transnational corporations such as Amazon to offset their production costs (including labour costs) at the expense of workers (Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2008; Huws, 2014). This connection between government funding and Amazon was

rarely, if ever, discussed throughout the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest during COVID-19. This omission is particularly egregious considering the rewards reaped by Amazon from the CARES act where they managed to obtain the lowest borrowing rates in US economic history while concurrently earning unprecedented amounts of profit from the elevated role Amazon played in the US economy (Brenner, 2020). Third, Shane briefly discusses Amazon's intensely surveilled workplaces where warehouse workers are threatened with termination if they fail to keep up the pace of work set by Amazon's management teams (Moore & Robinson, 2016; Moore, 2018; Delfanti, 2019; Delfanti & Frey, 2020). From this perspective, although Shane obscures who is responsible for the gruelling and punishing work environment at Amazon by elusively blaming the "computer", he is establishing a record of the precarious, stressful, and exhausting nature of Amazon warehouse work. A record that the *NYT* conveniently forgot a few months later.

The last article was published by the *NYT* on December 27th, 2019, written by David Streitfeld and was titled "Prime Anchor: An Amazon warehouse town dreams of a better life." This article addresses the impact Amazon warehouses have on the local communities and economies they have been built in focusing significantly on the extractive nature of Amazon. Streitfeld identifies several ways in which Amazon extracts value from these communities without investing anything in return, including the tax breaks Amazon receives from municipal governments which cut into local government budgets to fund schools, hospitals, and other community services, as well as taxes Amazon workers pay that go directly back into Amazon's pockets. Streitfeld writes, "In central Kentucky, Amazon has reaped benefits, including a type of tax break that critics label 'Paying Taxes to the Boss'. In the arrangement, 5 percent of Amazon workers' paychecks, which

would ordinarily be destined for the county and the state, go to Amazon itself. The company netted millions of dollars from this incentive over a decade."

Moreover, the article discusses the subsequent closures of many small businesses who were no longer profitable due to Amazon's competitive pricing and services. While thousands of small businesses were forced to permanently close during COVID-19, the critiques found in Streitfeld's article were infrequently discussed in relation to Amazon's economic rise throughout the pandemic. But, most importantly, Streitfeld mentions the utter dependency of these towns on Amazon's presence despite the disruptive and extractive relationship Amazon has with the communities. Since Amazon remains the leading employer in these areas, if they were to relocate their warehouses thousands of workers would be out of a job.

Despite these articles being published merely months before the outbreak of COVID-19, the layered ways in which Amazon infects and poisons its workers and the communities their warehouses operate in were largely absent, or forgotten, in the majority of the reporting of labour unrest during COVID-19. While the above articles provide a far more detailed criticism of Amazon, the *NYT*, and especially the *WaPo* and *the WSJ*, failed to include many more details when discussing Amazon warehouse workers' labour unrest throughout the global pandemic. Several scholarly studies as well as additional reporting done by media outlets such as *Vice, The Verge, Jacobin, Buzzfeed*, *Dissent Magazine,* and others have analyzed and discussed the gruelling working conditions at Amazon, how these working conditions are fundamentally linked to Amazon's production process, as well as contextualized the rise of Amazon within the continued spread and adoption of neoliberalism at the international, national, and local levels. Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese have even coined the term "Amazon capitalism" to illustrate how Amazon itself is indicative of the "destructive forces inherent in capitalism" (2021,

p. 29). The sustained exclusion of these analysis and information in the reporting done by the *NYT*, *WSJ*, and *WaPo* points to the role media amnesia plays in restructuring familiar events, phenomena, and, in this case, corporations and workers during emergent crises.

In order to correct the forgetful process of media amnesia, while refraining from providing an exhaustive account of the role of Amazon in contemporary American (as well as global) society, I highlight some pertinent and obvious details that are missing from the newspapers of record coverage of Amazon warehouse workers both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Amazon employs a lean production and just-in-time (JIT) inventory and distribution labour regime which subsequently shapes the flow and function of Amazon warehouse work (Moody, 2021). A JIT production process focuses on shortening the time in which an object is produced and subsequently becomes available for sale on the market (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). In the case of Amazon, JIT also includes the time in which a commodity is produced and delivered to the purchasing consumer. This is why one of Amazon's primary corporate objectives is limiting the time between their "first mile" (the time between a commodity moving from the original third-party seller or manufacturer to an Amazon warehouse) and their "last mile" (the time in which a purchased commodity leaves an Amazon facility and arrives at the consumers preferred location) (Moody, 2021). Amazon warehouses then are integral and foundational to the functioning of Amazon.

Within the warehouses themselves, there are two main departments. An "inbound" dock which unloads, receives, and stows the incoming commodities from third-party merchants and manufacturers, as well as a bigger "outbound" area which is divided into four specific jobs: picking (collecting the purchased items), packing (packaging up the purchased items), quality control check, and finally shipping (Amazon Workers & Supporters, 2018). Receiving, stowing

(placing incoming commodities on the appropriate shelves), picking, and packing are the four essential elements defining Amazon warehouse work (Delfanti, 2019). As Alessandro Delfanti and Bronwyn Frey (2020) point out Amazon warehouses are also digital workplaces. Each shelf within the warehouse (which holds the incoming commodities) is divided into smaller cells that come equipped with a unique and scannable code (Delfanti & Frey, 2020). All commodities entering and exiting the warehouses also come equipped with unique and scannable codes. The cells and commodities found in warehouses then are transitioned into stagnant and moving information which can subsequently be managed and tracked by Amazon management and headquarters (Delfanti & Frey, 2020).

As soon as warehouse workers arrive at the warehouses they are given a transportable GPS tracking device which monitors their every move (or lack thereof) throughout the duration of their shift, subsequently transforming the workers into manageable and trackable information alongside the cells and commodities. This continuous ever-present form of data collection keeps Amazon workers perpetually under the electronic gaze of Amazon's management team (Manokha, 2019). As each item that enters the fulfilment center is scanned, nothing in the facility is lost and pickers, who are guided by their GPS devices, are easily directed to the location of each item. Similarly, stowers are directed to the appropriate shelf to stock each commodity. Warehouse pickers and stowers are notified by their GPS trackers where the shortest route to the proper bins and shelves are, whether they are running behind the allotted time given to reach each destination, and by how much (Manokha, 2019). If receivers, stowers, pickers, or packers are running behind, managers are able to send them an instant message chastising them for their poor productivity. The speed in which a warehouse worker moves, sorts, packs, or picks the selected items is integral to Amazon warehouse work. As Moody writes, "Amazon's relentless

efforts to tighten, speed up and cheapen its “just-in-time” transportation systems, of course, mean more pressure on the workers in its facilities to pick, prepare, pack, and/or sort the incoming and outgoing traffic at each facility in ‘real time’” (2021, p. 46).

While one pre-pandemic *NYT* article written by Scott Shane addressed the ubiquitous and rampant automatic terminations at Amazon warehouses, Shane failed to identify how these rates come to shape Amazon warehouse workers’ work. With the looming threat of instantaneous punishment or termination Amazon workers are forced to comply with outwardly determined and constantly changing productivity rates and goals. The brutality of Amazon’s implementation and monitoring of productivity rates for their workers has been widely documented over the course of a decade with workers skipping out on bathroom breaks, lunch, and often falling ill or injuring themselves on the job. Media reporting concerning the working conditions at Amazon warehouses has been available for about a decade but the details and even the stories are often not picked up by the *WSJ*, the *NYT*, or the *WaPo*. As we saw in earlier coverage, if the stories are picked up the reporting is published later than alternative news outlets or the coverage frequently waters down, dilutes, or obscures both the nature of the work done at Amazon facilities as well as who is responsible for the hazardous working conditions Amazon workers are forced to endure. As Spencer Soper wrote for *The Morning Call* back in 2011,

> Workers said they were forced to endure brutal heat inside the sprawling warehouse and were pushed to work at a pace many could not sustain. Employees were frequently reprimanded regarding their productivity and threatened with termination, workers said. The consequences of not meeting work expectations were regularly on display, as employees lost their jobs and got escorted out of the warehouse. Such sights encouraged some workers to conceal pain and push through injury lest they get fired as well, workers said.

This sentiment was reiterated by the Amazon warehouse worker William Stolz throughout COVID-19 as well. Stolz says,

> As time went on, management would increase those numbers, sometimes tell us, sometimes not. Or just sometimes make it unclear what the actual speed was so that workers would be afraid and go beyond it. Instead of everybody being judged to a fixed number we are all on a curve. Now, with the coronavirus, Amazon is not giving out any write-ups for speed. But, even with all the tracking, the managers have control. Take coding time. Every second that we are on the clock gets coded. All my picks will automatically get coded in the computer as time I spent picking (Pottenger, 2020, p. 106).

The speed of the work at Amazon warehouses created major obstacles regarding implementing appropriate health and safety measures to combat and mitigate the spread of COVID-19. As Amazon warehouse workers in Poland remark, "the continuous stress, noise, physical exhaustion, and lack of time to rest between shifts affect workers' health. The heavy workload, running, and lifting particularly place stress on joints, feet, and backs. No wonder the sickness rate among permanent workers is high (2018, p. 99)." Jake Alimahomed-Wilson and Ellen Reese found similar concerns at warehouses in the United States too. They write, "Managers and supervisors pressure them [warehouse workers] to 'make rate', in order to locate, pack, and move items quickly, while minimizing their errors and 'time off task.' Pressure to work fast and 'make rate' increases the risk of workplace injury in an industry already known to be injury prone. An investigation of Amazon's injury records from 23 of its 110 fulfillment centers in the United States showed their rate of serious injuries (9.6 per 100 full-time workers) was about double the national industry average" (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2021, p. 27). The gruelling and constantly changing productivity rates warehouse workers are expected and obligated to work at played a significant role in leading warehouse workers to organize, strike, and attempt to unionize both preceding and during COVID-19.

Considering the wide reporting in a wide range of media over the course of several years that discusses the high injury rates associated with Amazon warehouse work, it is quite surprising that these details were absent in the majority of the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest in the *NYT*, *WaPo*, and *WSJ* during the COVID-19 period. However, it is important to note that the *NYT* by far produced the most critical coverage of Amazon both before and during COVID-19. The *NYT*'s pre-covid coverage is arguably the most critical coverage produced during the timeframe examined in this thesis. With that being said, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage, in comparison to alternative mainstream news outlets such as *Vice* or *Buzzfeed*, remains remarkably less critical overall. Yet, even though *Vice* or *Buzzfeed*'s coverage was more consistent and critical than the newspapers of record examined in this thesis, further analysis of their coverage is necessary to discern how *Vice* or *Buzzfeed*'s coverage overall fits within historical and contemporary representations of labour produced by the news media.

Although it is the nature of the work done at Amazon warehouses which creates an unsafe and dangerous workplace, these health and safety considerations (including rate of injury, sickness, as well as instant punishment for taking breaks deemed unnecessary) were rarely discussed alongside the additional health and safety risks imposed by COVID-19. The *NYT*, *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers failed to connect the health and safety risks that are foundational to Amazon warehouse work with the risks of COVID-19. More importantly, since an unprecedentedly high and continuous stream of orders were flowing in and out of warehouses throughout the pandemic, warehouse workers were likely more prone to experiencing injuries, sickness, or punishment on the job. The rise of the COVID-19 pandemic subsequently led to the reframing of the impact of Amazon on the US economy as well as the long-standing and ongoing labour unrest within Amazon facilities where reporters were able to

cover over their previous reporting by failing to contextualize the surge in labour unrest found at Amazon warehouses throughout the pandemic.

*Hiring and Employment*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* often leveraged Amazon's hiring plans as a way to offset or curtail their coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. The *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* frequently celebrated the fact that Amazon was hiring droves of workers during a moment of enormously high unemployment rates. In some cases, Amazon's ability to hire tens of thousands of workers during the global pandemic was seen as one of the few bright spots of the otherwise dismal US economy. However, like the coverage of the effects of Amazon warehouses on local communities, economies, and workers, the coverage of Amazon's employment vacancies carried a different and more scathing tone in the pre-COVID coverage of the newspapers of record.

There are two articles published during the pre-COVID period which identify the problems with Amazon's hiring plans. Both articles were published by the *NYT*. The first article written by Karen Weise was published on September 9th, 2019 and was titled "Amazon has 30,000 Open Jobs. Yes, You Read that Right." While Weise's article is not nearly as critical as the articles examined in the previous section, she still offers a more substantive critique of Amazon than what was found in the majority of coverage throughout COVID-19. Importantly, as Weise notes, the 30,000 jobs mentioned in the article account for all of the employment vacancies at Amazon, including white collar tech jobs as well as warehouse jobs (although, warehouse jobs account for a fraction of the total vacancies). Right off the bat, Weise further contextualizes the job openings at Amazon within Amazon's entire US corporation. In the COVID-19 coverage, the only detail

consistently provided regarding available jobs was the total number of job openings. While contextualizing the types of jobs available at Amazon does not necessarily imply the article is critical of Amazon's hiring plans, it suggests that Weise examined Amazon's hiring announcements in a thorough way which was not applied to the coverage published during COVID-19. However, Weise's criticisms can be found in her discussion about the role Amazon's hiring announcements play in their overarching public relations strategy.

In the article Weise writes,

> As traditional retailers continue to close stores and antitrust concerns about big technology companies swirl in Washington, Amazon has increasingly used its growing work force as a political tool. Amazon takes employees on tours of Congress, giving lawmakers protective vests emblazoned with the names of warehouses in their home states. The company also issues frequent reports and news releases like the announcement on Monday about the jobs it has created… Amazon has signaled to investors that it is entering a reinvestment cycle, where its costs will increase as it seeks to expand in strategic areas. In its latest earnings call with Wall Street analysts, the company highlighted the recent growth of the sales and marketing staffs for its cloud computing services and for the logistics and transportation networks it is building to make deliveries.

There are two important points contained within this passage. First, Weise openly connects Amazon's job announcements as a political tool used in relation to the growing antitrust concerns being mounted against Amazon. Weise also contextualizes Amazon's announcement of their hiring plans within Amazon's overall public relations strategy, which as Weise points out, is done in part to present a positive pro-worker image of Amazon to Congresspeople as a way to curry support from American legislative members. This connection between Amazon's announcements of their hiring plans and their public relations strategy was never subsequently articulated, pointed to, or even subtly referenced throughout the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest during COVID-19. Considering the anti-trust concerns waged against

Amazon grew precipitously throughout the global pandemic, this omission is rather striking, and demonstrates that in fact the onset of COVID-19 led to a *narrowing* of critical responses to Amazon. Second, Weise explicitly enunciates what Amazon is implying by announcing their search for a large volume of employees. As Weise notes, Amazon is signaling to their investors that they are about to enter a period of substantive growth. In comparison to the coverage of Amazon's hiring plans during COVID-19, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* neglected to mention Amazon's hiring plans in relation to their corporate expansion until the fall of 2020. While the announcement of thousands of new job vacancies implies in and of itself that Amazon is growing, the fact that Weise constructs this overt connection between Amazon, their investors, and Amazon's expansion prior to COVID-19 and yet fails to re-articulate what Amazon's announcement of their hiring plans means during COVID-19 (while Amazon workers are concurrently organizing and attempting to unionize) is a perfect example of the power of media amnesia. Only a few months later, Weise will reframe Amazon's hiring plans as a boon in an otherwise failing economy.

The second article published prior to COVID-19 that provides a substantive critique of Amazon is David Streitfeld's article, "The Amazon Behemoth and Its Would-Be David" which was published on November 26th, 2019. In the article, Streitfeld discusses two reports which analyze Amazon's role and impact in the US economy, society, as well as on the environment. The first is produced by a newly formed grassroots coalition, Athena, which works on issues including digital surveillance, antitrust, as well as the working conditions at Amazon. Athena's report, titled "Too Big to Govern," details the effects inflicted on the communities where Amazon warehouses are located while outlining the burgeoning threat Amazon poses to workers, small businesses and industries, as well as to the environment. The second report is produced by the

Economic Roundtable which is a non-profit research group located in Southern California. Their report details the social and economic impact of Amazon warehouses on communities in Southern California which has become a warehouse development hotspot for logistics corporations. While the reports produced by Athena and the Economic Roundtable as well as Streitfeld's article touch upon Amazon's hiring plans indirectly, they provide important information which helps contextualize later coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest in the newspapers of record. In the article Streitfeld writes,

> Amazon workers and Amazon customers exist in two different worlds, the Economic Roundtable said. The report calculates that a little over half of Amazon warehouse workers in Southern California live in substandard housing. And for every $1 in wages, they receive 24 cents in public assistance.

Amazon's hiring plans seem rather lackluster when contextualized within warehouse workers depreciating standards of living as well as their dependence on state subsidies for survival. The poverty Amazon warehouse workers are forced to continue enduring despite working long, gruelling, and high intensity shifts while keeping their schedules perpetually open on the off-chance they are called into work at the last minute is precisely why Amazon faced a chronic labour shortage throughout the global pandemic (Rajendra, 2021). If the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* substantively drew connections between Amazon's labour shortages and the precarious poverty characterizing the majority of Amazon warehouse workers lives, perhaps the framing of Amazon's hiring plans would have shifted. As Ursula Huws suggests, "tax credits, the favoured neoliberal model of social transfer, have played a particularly pernicious role in disguising not only the extent to which many jobs pay wages that are well below subsistence level but also in concealing from public awareness the reality that a large and growing proportion of social

benefit payments go not to unemployed ‘scroungers’ but to workers in employment” (2014, p. 175).

However, before expanding upon the structural factors contributing to the media amnesia found in the coverage produced by these newspapers of record, let us address a few pertinent details missing from the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*’s coverage regarding Amazon’s hiring plans overall. First of all, as Delfanti and Frey note, “the scale of Amazon’s e-commerce operations requires mass employment to sustain mass consumption and production. This is reminiscent of the Fordist factory of the past” (2020, p. 5). The fact that Amazon is consistently announcing the creation of a large number of jobs is unsurprising based on the nature of Amazon’s business model as well as their strategic corporate objectives. It makes sense that a company operating at such a massive scale like Amazon requires a similarly massive volume of workers to carry out the operations and functions of the company. As Amazon’s monopoly continues expanding (while their growth, in turn, means the destruction of other competitors and industries) they will subsequently need to hire additional labourers.

Secondly, Amazon employs a dual hiring model with some workers permanent and others temporary; a model implemented in order to create further anxieties about job security while intensifying competition amongst workers (Moore, 2018; Moore & Robinson, 2016; Chen, 2021). By creating an atmosphere of precarity, insecurity, and competitiveness, employers are able to extract higher rates of productivity and therefore value from their employees (Moore & Robinson, 2016). Within Amazon, the dual employment strategy is personified by the visual distinctions between temporary and permanent workers. William Stolz, the Amazon warehouse worker cited earlier, remarks, “every warehouse worker in Amazon is either a direct hire by Amazon or a temp, hired by Integrity Staffing Solutions, an outside employment agency. Temp

workers have white badges, and direct hires have blue badges. Blue badges and white badges do the same jobs. But blue badges are paid slightly better, get more benefits, and have slightly more job security" (Pottenger, 2020, p. 107).

Most temporary employees are hired under the auspices of becoming a permanent warehouse worker within 90 days (Pottenger, 2020). Yet, as many warehouse workers have attested, the odds of a temporary worker becoming permanent are quite low and often depend on the needs of the warehouses. Interestingly, before and during COVID-19, most newly hired workers arrived at the warehouses donning a white badge denoting their status as a temporary employee (Pottenger, 2020). Amazon, then, dangles the possibility of full-time and permanent employment in the future over warehouse workers heads as a way to ensure compliance with Amazon's working conditions as well as attempting to dissuade workers from participating in any worker dissent or unionizing efforts. As Amazon workers in Poland attest, "While there is some seasonal change in the demand or number of orders—for instance, in the pre-Christmas period—Amazon also exaggerates these seasonal changes and uses them as an excuse for the employment of large numbers of temporary agency workers it can hire and fire" (2018, p. 97).

Third, Amazon has a notoriously high labour turnover rate due to both the short-term contracts offered to temporary workers as well as due to the punishing nature of the work done at Amazon warehouses generally (Amazon Workers & Supporters, 2018). Permanent workers often quit their job due to the insecurity produced from the presence of temporary workers, the meagre wages earned by warehouse workers, consistently shifting work schedules, the unsustainability of constantly changing productivity rates, as well as the high rate of risk associated with the job. From this perspective, Amazon executes employment practices which highlights the disposability of their workforce. By developing a disposable workforce, Amazon is able to

minimize their production costs while offsetting wages, housing, and general worker maintenance (including purchasing food) onto other actors, including the state (as mentioned earlier), as well as workers' families. In her chapter "Gender, Race, and Amazon Warehouse Labour in the United States," Ellen Reese found that the majority of the Amazon warehouse workers she interviewed "lived with their parents, family members, or roommates, which helped them to pay for housing and other household expenses" (2021, p. 133). Amazon's dependence on a disposable workforce subsequently means they will be consistently hiring. In this case, while Amazon's workforce is indeed expanding, because of the high turnover rate found at Amazon warehouses, the real rate of expansion is much slower than hiring numbers would suggest. Amazon's projected hiring plans then would account for the large volume of workers they lost throughout the calendar year.

Although the coverage of Amazon's hiring plans in the pre-COVID period provides substantive critiques which call into question the value or worth of Amazon's employment vacancies, the *NYT*, (and especially) the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ* failed to carry over these considerations throughout their reporting during COVID-19. One of the reasons why the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ*'s coverage of Amazon's hiring plans largely evaded calling into question Amazon's hiring announcements is due to the second characteristic of media amnesia: the presence of a narrow range of elite perspectives. All three newspapers of record were dependent on Amazon's corporate representatives or Amazon's self-published material for the scope and shape of their stories. The most critical coverage of Amazon published throughout COVID-19 typically contained a higher volume of oppositional voices, including warehouse workers. If the media, as Stuart Hall claims, are directed to certain topics and frames based on the information they receive from the primary definers considered credible and reliable by the news outlets in

question which shape their stories, then it makes sense that the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* would write stories that are devoid of contextualizing Amazon's hiring plans (Hall, 1974, 1982). If objectivity and credibility are associated with verifiable and credible sources, which means objectivity and credibility are derived from Amazon's corporate representatives, then reporters would not feel obligated to scrutinize the statements given from these primary definers. Furthermore, with the increasing marketization of news outlets where a handful of media conglomerates own the majority of news outlets operating in the United States, the sources deemed credible by these news outlets are ones likely to reaffirm the views of the elites (Basu, 2018; Herman, 2018; McChesney, 2015). This fits within Herman and Chomsky's arguments in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) where they suggest that the sourcing practices of news outlets is one of the primary ways in which the news media consolidates the views of the elites.

Moreover, the speed at which the news is written and produced contributes to the amnesiac reporting informing the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers. As Basu argues, "Market pressures mean journalists are having to produce news at 'warp speed'. This means that they will use established networks of sources they can rely upon to give a quote quickly and in a convenient format. These tend to be officials and other powerful groups that have well-resourced communications departments. And journalists and editors are more likely to want to avoid lawsuits or flak and will adjust their content accordingly" (2018, p. 63). As the news has become further marketized, news outlets have given fewer resources to their reporters to cover important and nuanced stories. With fewer resources available, reporters become more and more dependent on primary definers to flesh out their stories. This is why Basu identifies the ongoing economic restructuration of the news throughout the neoliberal period as the fertile grounds in which media amnesia is produced (2018).

*Warehouse Visits*

On August 25th, 2019, Jay Greene published a story at the *WaPo* titled "Amazon's strategy to win over lawmaker critics: Warehouse tours." In this article, Greene illustrates the public relations theater of Amazon strategically inviting people in powerful positions, including lawmakers, to observe and view their warehouses. The tours themselves were broached with skepticism with Greene attempting to see through the façade calculatedly constructed by Amazon. In the article Greene writes,

> From the White House to the campaign trail for the Democratic presidential nomination, politicians have found a popular punching bag in Amazon, accusing the retail giant of paying subsistence wages to warehouse workers while dodging taxes… For years, critics have accused the company of underpaying and overworking warehouse employees. In the United States, Amazon employs about 250,000 typically hourly workers, many of whom perform strenuous and mundane jobs such as walking many miles a day, picking items off shelves or packing up boxes. In response, the online retail giant has started a campaign to try to turn the tide - particularly as regulators take a closer look at the company for possible abuse of power… Amazon has increased efforts to push back against its critics, including offering tours at 23 warehouses in the United States to let visitors see firsthand how its facilities operate. The company said more than 150,000 people have toured this year, including more than 560 federal, state and local policymakers and their staffs, a pace that is likely to far surpass the number of visits it had last year. And with Congress now on its summer break, the company has welcomed a bevy of politicians to warehouses nationwide in recent weeks… The spate of warehouse visits hasn't toned down any of the opprobrium from Amazon's fiercest critics. [Senator Bernie] Sanders had said he would visit an Amazon fulfillment center. But in his ongoing sparring with the company, he has said he's "not interested in a photo op at an Amazon warehouse."

Despite Greene's attempts to minimize the criticism's made against Amazon by using language such as critics using Amazon as a 'punching bag' or by suggesting the claims made against Amazon are merely accusations, the article clearly indicates that Amazon is using warehouse tours as a tool in their public relations strategy to offset the building criticisms that were becoming commonplace. Greene conveys the scale at which Amazon has opened up their

facilities in an attempt to manufacture moments of transparency between the American public and the corporation. Yet, Greene also identifies the ineffectiveness of the warehouse tours while reiterating the truth behind them: creating potential photo opportunities as a way to dissuade lawmakers and other people in power that Amazon is in fact exploiting their workforce. This skepticism and critique entirely vanish about a year later.

On June 9th, 2020 Karen Weise and Ruth Fremson published a story in the *NYT*, titled "What it Looks Like Inside an Amazon Warehouse Now" after they partook in an Amazon warehouse tour. With Amazon warehouse workers widely and publicly articulating Amazon's ineffective and delayed response to implementing COVID-19 health and safety measures, Amazon once more opened up their warehouses to the public to illustrate that the critiques waged against them by their workers and the media are unfounded. As the warehouse worker, organizer, and activist William Stolz remarks, "since our protests, Amazon started propaganda tours of sorts. Anyone can visit" (Pottenger, 2020, p. 106). However, the propagandistic nature of the warehouse visits went unnoticed by Weise and Fremson. In their article they write,

> The giant internet retailer has started running television ads that show that its warehouse and delivery employees have masks and other protective gear. It has pushed out segments to local news stations touting its safety improvements. It has asked journalists to visit its warehouses to see for themselves. But in recent weeks, workers said, some conditions inside the warehouses have improved. And the company, which was in emergency response mode in March and April, has resumed a more regular rhythm of business.

Although Weise and Fremson begin their article expounding on the public relations campaign Amazon has embarked on to deter people from believing their warehouses pose a health and safety threat to warehouse workers, they dilute this connection by highlighting how the warehouses have changed. Considering Amazon opened up one of their most technologically sophisticated warehouses for these warehouse tours, Weise and Fremson's skepticism should be

foregrounded throughout the article. Instead, Weise and Fremson document the changes they noticed (or, perhaps, the changes pointed out to them by the Amazon representative guiding the tour) in the warehouses, including the heightened surveillance techniques employed by Amazon such as thermal cameras used to constantly monitor warehouse workers temperatures as well as the testing center Amazon constructed. These testing centers played an important part in Amazon's public relations campaign throughout COVID-19 as noted in the previous chapter. Weise and Fremson write,

> The biggest transformation is at the building's [warehouse] entryway, a wide lobby area with tall turnstiles. Workers would previously pass through the turnstiles and start their shift. Now when they arrive, they are channeled past thermal cameras, manned by colleagues, to take their temperatures… When workers enter the makeshift testing center, they scan their company badge. They are handed, via forceps, a test kit for the virus… Workers still come and go. They grab lunch in the break room and have a smoke outside. Those are signs that business is getting back to normal… Emilie Deschamps, a worker whom Amazon authorized to talk publicly, joined the warehouse in October. She said the biggest change hadn't been physical but, rather, how Amazon had adjusted break times to stagger them and reduce congestion. The company also gave people extra time to wash their hands, she said.

Since the warehouse tours were organized by Amazon, where Amazon selected the warehouse workers journalists were allowed to speak with, Weise and Fremson should have extended their article beyond this tour to include alternative voices countering the narratives pushed by Amazon throughout the tour. From this perspective, Weise and Fremson did not attempt to balance their story by including oppositional voices, suggesting that the *NYT* employment of news values including impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity largely applies to the stories that are considered antagonistic to corporations themselves rather than stories that can be read as antagonistic to workers.

Instead of Weise and Fremson approaching their warehouse visit with the skepticism even Weise articulated prior to COVID-19, their article does precisely what Amazon had hoped their warehouse tours would achieve: through these warehouse tours, the press would alter their critical narratives regarding the safety of Amazon warehouses. Weise and Fremson offer up an image of Amazon as back to business while supporting their employees. Amazon may have deserved criticisms for their slow implementation of COVID-19 related health and safety measures, but things have changed. The warehouses have changed, they have actually improved. Rather than questioning the reasoning behind their visit or perhaps even attempting to see behind the images of the warehouse put forward by Amazon, Weise and Fremson marveled at the changes they found. And yet, these changes surprisingly did not deter the spread of COVID-19. In fact, about six months after this article was published, the *World Socialist Website* as well as other media outlets reported that Poushawn Brown, an Amazon worker tasked with doing COVID-19 testing, had died from the COVID-19 virus (2021). While Brown did not work at the warehouse Weise and Fremson visited, Brown's passing is further evidence of the ineffectiveness of Amazon's health and safety measures; an ineffectiveness that Weise and Fremson failed to consider in their reporting of their warehouse tour.

The stark contrast between the reporting of these two warehouse visits clearly indicate the workings of media amnesia. Between the two warehouse visits, a deadly pandemic swept around the globe, multiple strikes took place at Amazon warehouses around the country, workers stopped showing up to work despite their insecure financial positions, while Amazon massively grew and expanded their operations. Despite the myriad of opportunities for the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* to advance their criticisms of Amazon throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, their coverage suggests that these newspapers of record are less willing to criticize Amazon now than

they were before. In a moment where people across the United States (and around the world) are galvanized against Amazon, where the threat of Amazon on communities, workers, and the environment have precipitated discussions surrounding alternative ways of containing Amazon's rise, including nationalizing Amazon's infrastructure, or calling on the US government to regulate and oversee Amazon's production and distribution process viewing Amazon as a public utility, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* have turned a blind eye to these alternatives (Rajendra, 2021). Instead, through the process of media amnesia, the *WSJ*, the *WaPo*, and the *NYT* have worked to re-legitimize Amazon's role in the US economy and society.

## Conclusion

This thesis originally sought out to assess whether or not a hegemonic shift had occurred in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal's* coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest throughout COVID-19. Although moments did arise throughout the coverage, especially within the *NYT*, which carried the potentiality of fomenting a hegemonic rupture, the space for rupture was largely contained as time passed. However, while these brief moments contained within the coverage failed to materialize into an enduring shift in the ways in which these newspapers of record cover labour unrest, the moments themselves suggest that anti-neoliberal sentiments are brewing, mounting, and materializing throughout American society. From this perspective, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage worked in part to distort or minimize the effects of workers, in particular, realizing that other futurities outside of neoliberal capitalism are possible. Now, let us return to the questions and concerns shaping the scope of this thesis.

The first question this research set out to answer was: How were Amazon warehouse workers framed by the media during COVID-19?

Overall, the framing of Amazon warehouse workers was determined largely by the disruptive event frame often employed when discussing issues concerning labour unrest in the dominant media. While the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* did provide (infrequent) sympathetic coverage to the plight Amazon warehouse workers suffered near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were slow to pick up the story about the ongoing labour unrest at Amazon facilities. In fact, the early coverage of these news outlets celebrated the scanty sick-leave policies and wage

increases Amazon instituted after Amazon workers protested their lack of response to COVID-19.

Two events had to coincide in order for these news outlets to cover the burgeoning labour unrest seriously: the unlawful termination of Christian Smalls, an Amazon warehouse worker in New York, as well as a leaked memo published by *Vice* detailing Amazon's corporate public relations strategy to curb the growing criticisms they were facing regarding their poor treatment of warehouse workers. Interestingly, the *NYT* and the *WaPo*'s coverage in particular (since the *WSJ* did not cover the leaked memo until later) shifted due to revelations produced by alternative mainstream news outlets. Throughout this thesis, I have drawn on additional news outlets coverage of Amazon warehouse workers in order to illustrate the limitations of the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ*'s coverage. While analyzing the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers done by alternative news outlets sits outside the purview of this thesis, it was necessary to include outside articles in order to contextualize the coverage produced by these newspapers of record. In this case, more robust coverage of Amazon warehouse workers' labour unrest could be found in alternative mainstream news outlets such as *Vice* whose coverage occasionally (as with the publication of the leaked memo), contributed to a shift in reporting at the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ*. Although the dominant media often shape the scope and set the frames for developing stories, in this case, their frames shifted in response to news published by a leading alternative news outlet. This suggests that the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ*'s coverage could be pushed into more progressive and critical directions based on the reporting produced by competitor news outlets such as *Vice.* However, as was seen in the *NYT*, the *WaPo,* and the *WSJ*'s later coverage, this shift towards more substantive and critical reporting about Amazon

warehouse workers labour unrest was temporary and petered out over the course of several months despite alternative news outlets continuing to report on the issue.

By the end of the timeline which this thesis examines (the fall of 2020), Amazon's warehouse workers' labour unrest was rarely covered by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, or the *WSJ*. If these news outlets did cover Amazon warehouse workers, their labour unrest was nominalized through the employment of descriptive words and phrases such as Amazon receiving criticism for their COVID-19 policies (or lack thereof). In total, then, the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers fits within the anti-labour bias characterizing the contemporary and historical relationship between workers and the dominant media. Several factors contributed to the reproduction of an anti-labour lens, including the news values of event over process, effect over cause, the simplification or dilution of stories, a chronic fixation of conflict and dramatic events, and a myopic focus on the latest developments of a story (Basu, 2018; McNair 1994). Through the implementation of these news values, Amazon warehouse workers' labour unrest was reported on during the initial moment of the crisis which subsequently led to the minimal coverage of their actions as time went on.

The second question this research set out to answer was: how were Amazon warehouse workers framed by the media prior to COVID-19? What were the similarities and/or differences in coverage?

Surprisingly, the pre-COVID coverage of Amazon warehouse workers by the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* was overall remarkably more critical and comprehensive than the reporting by those same outlets throughout COVID-19. The *NYT* in particular published a small series of nuanced investigative reports which addressed multiple aspects of Amazon's business, including the

effects of warehouses on local communities, economies, workers, as well as the environment. Now, it is important to keep in mind that this thesis only examined seven months worth of pre-COVID coverage which means that this short time frame of coverage examined may not speak to the overall reporting produced by these news outlets over the last several years. Considering several scholars and journalists have written about the erosion of the quality of the news, specifically the decline in reporting about labour, throughout the neoliberal period, the odds are fairly high that the few articles examined prior to COVID-19 sit outside of these news outlets regular reporting (Kumar, 2001; Puette, 1992; Gitlin, 2003; Mort, 1992; Martin, 2019; Kendall, 2011).

Additionally, while the majority of the articles examined during the pre-COVID period contained further scrutiny of Amazon, the articles continued stifling, minimizing, and playing down Amazon's role in the US economy and society. Only three out of the nineteen articles examined in the pre-COVID period detailed either the toll working for Amazon takes on workers or the destructive consequences of Amazon's business objective of fast free delivery (including increased traffic accidents and deaths, the punishing working conditions found within Amazon warehouses, the environmental effects produced in communities housing warehouses, the depletion of municipal and state resources for local communities, as well as the eradication of local industries and businesses upon Amazon's arrival). The fact that only nineteen articles were published within the seven-month period of pre-COVID coverage examined suggests that Amazon remained a relatively underreported topic for these newspapers of record.

However, the differences between the reporting done prior to the COVID-19 pandemic with the coverage published throughout COVID-19 are striking. While the number of articles published

discussing Amazon warehouse workers increased, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* seemed to have forgotten, or actively disremembered their earlier coverage. News values such as prioritizing effect over cause or event over process contributed to the amnesiac reporting done by these newspapers of record. The *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* failed to draw any connections between the growing labour unrest in Amazon facilities throughout COVID-19 with the pre-COVID strikes, protests, and unionizing efforts that they themselves had reported on. As mentioned in the previous section, the later coverage of Amazon warehouse workers during the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* had even forgotten their earlier pandemic reporting as well. Similar to what Laura Basu found in her analysis of the media's active forgetting throughout their coverage of the 2007/8 global financial crisis, the factors contributing to the shallow and limited coverage include the economic restructuration of the news media (in particular the concentration of ownership of the media under a handful of transnational corporations), the limitations imposed on journalists' ability to research and comprehend the stories they are covering, the heightened speed in which stories are produced, as well as reporters reliance on primary definers (i.e. Amazon corporate representatives) to flesh out their stories. Overall, the differences in coverage between these two periods suggest that these newspapers of record are producing less critical coverage of Amazon where they have become further dependent on Amazon's spokespeople or self-published material to frame their stories. From this perspective, while a shift away from neoliberalism may be percolating on the ground in the United States, the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* seem to have intensified their commitment to upholding neoliberalist values where these newspapers of record align themselves with corporations such as Amazon rather than with Amazon's workers.

The third question this research set out to answer was: how does the current news coverage of Amazon warehouse workers fit within historical representations of labour?

The coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest throughout COVID-19 often reflected historical representations of labour. The anti-labour bias that shaped previous coverage of labour, including but not limited to, minimizing the effects of strikes, focusing on the effects of the labour actions versus the causes, highlighting the gains labour would supposedly receive if they were to accept management or corporate's offers while omitting the gains management and executives would receive, trivializing the labour actions, relying on corporate representatives to shape the story, were found throughout the reporting of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest as well. From this perspective, the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers does not deviate from these newspapers of records long-held anti labour positions.

However, there are some important differences which characterized the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ*'s coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. Amazon warehouse workers have been attempting to form legally certified unions for several years now but are currently not unionized, which means that the strikes enacted by these workers were wildcat strikes and sit outside of state sanctioned labour actions. Additionally, because Amazon warehouse workers have informal rather than formal unions the negotiation process between them and Amazon headquarters also assumes a different shape than the labour reporting analyzed by media scholars, such as Michael Parenti or William Puette. Despite striking and engaging in other forms of labour action, Amazon warehouse workers could not force Amazon headquarters into direct communication with them where warehouse workers could articulate their grievances. In fact, as Amazon warehouse workers labour actions grew, Amazon headquarters did not expand

or change the temporary COVID-19 policies they instituted at the beginning of the pandemic, such as extended unpaid sick leave on top of two weeks paid sick leave.

Moreover, without a legally sanctioned unionized workforce, Amazon warehouses remain relatively isolated and disconnected from each other across the United States. This means that worker actions at Amazon are usually independently lead by individual warehouses. One of the reasons why Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest picked up national traction and were reported on by these newspapers of record was due to the sheer volume of Amazon warehouses across the country engaging in labour actions. The coverage of Amazon warehouse workers by these newspapers of record, however, did not attempt to connect the mutual struggle between the warehouses and instead often undermined any budding connection amongst warehouse workers at different facilities by minimizing the number of people involved in the strikes, pointing to the alleged inefficiency of the labour actions, while simultaneously highlighting dissenting worker's opinions amongst warehouse employees. Informal unions and worker organizations such as Amazonians United are currently developing chapters at different Amazon warehouses in the United States and are actively communicating with legally verified Amazon unions in other countries such as Poland, Germany, France, etc. The transnational element of Amazon illuminates another difference between Amazon warehouse workers and more traditional unions that have and continue existing in the United States, which have ordinarily been concerned with national labour issues. Since Amazon has warehouses, sorting facilities, data centers, and both ground and air delivery services around the world, space is created for workers to connect across national borders and develop a transnational union. In this case then Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest represents the changes in labour forces that were brought on by neoliberalist

globalization where workers are competing with each other both domestically and internationally.

As Amazon warehouse workers have intensified their pursuit to unionize in warehouses around the United States, the labour struggle at Amazon is far from over. If (or once) Amazon warehouse workers form legally sanctioned unions in the US, the coverage of Amazon warehouse workers could change. Since the conclusion of the timeline examined in this thesis, several warehouses have attempted to unionize in the United States with established unions such as Teamsters partnering with Amazon warehouse workers to advance their unionizing efforts. Several revelations have also come to the surface regarding Amazon's anti-union efforts, including hiring the notorious union-busting private police force, the Pinkertons. From this perspective, this thesis examines perhaps the beginning of a much larger labour movement developing within Amazon subsequently creating a future avenue for study.

The fourth question this research set out to answer was: what does this coverage suggest in terms of how labour is valued and understood today?

There are two ways to answer this question. The first way is to address how labour is valued and understood today based on the fact that these newspapers of record covered Amazon warehouse worker labour unrest generally. Over the course of the last year, hundreds of strikes have occurred throughout the country. Such a volume of strikes means that the dominant media are obligated to report on at least some of them in order to maintain their credibility as news outlets which reflect the pertinent issues of today (Hall, 1982). From this perspective, the sheer number of strikes suggests that a greater emphasis is being placed on the value of labour where people across the country are questioning the reasonings behind their depreciating working conditions

and standards of living while concurrently demanding more. This in and of itself suggests a shift has occurred in how people are perceiving and approaching the role of labour in society broadly. The fact that the *NYT* even published an editorial piece supporting Amazon warehouse workers right to unionize is a testament to the fact that people are rejecting the devaluation of labour that has occurred over the last forty years due to the processes of neoliberalism. The stark realities between workers and the elite classes were on full display throughout the pandemic as a handful of people accrued tremendous wealth while millions of Americans lost their jobs, faced housing crises, as well as food shortages.

The second way to address this question is by assessing how the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* reflected the shifting valuation of labour in their coverage of Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest. The answer to this question is mixed. On one hand, while the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* did provide occasional articles which illuminated the fissures between Amazon and Amazon warehouse workers, their coverage overall suggests that these newspapers of record are mostly interested in labour when an event precipitates their involvement (i.e. the firing of Christian Smalls and the leaked memo). As noted in Chapter Three, while strikes are often characterized as events worthy of coverage, if the strikes are considered small or insubstantial the odds are lower that the dominant media will report on them. Additionally, part of the reason why these newspapers of record began covering Amazon warehouse workers labour unrest is due to the public support Amazon workers received from prominent politicians such as Senator Bernie Sanders, or the New York Attorney General, alongside the media's irregular willingness to listen to workers pushed into the public spotlight like Christian Smalls. This suggests that labour is only considered when other powerful groups or people are willing to speak out on workers behalf. Labour's value then is only heightened when a consensus amongst politicians,

attorneys general, or additional media outlets is reached. Here, labour's value is affected, dependent on, and shaped in relation to the support provided by other elements of American society.

Furthermore, answering the question how is labour valued and understood today based on the reporting examined would depend on which period or phase of reporting we are directly addressing. In the pre-COVID reporting, labour would be seen as disproportionately under assault where workers are assuming a significant amount of risk with little benefit by working for the richest corporation in recorded human history. In some of the COVID-19 reporting, this sentiment is carried over although this frame is often contained within the context of the virus itself. The valuation of labour was more or less determined within the scope of how COVID-19 changed the working conditions for warehouse workers without the coverage extending far beyond these considerations. If we are addressing how labour is understood and valued today based on the final phase of reporting throughout COVID-19, what I referred to as workers protest as hazy memory, the value of labour would neatly align with long-standing neoliberalist perspectives. While labour is necessary in order to procure larger amounts of profits, corporations as well as the state are not responsible for the maintenance of workers (including ensuring workers receive a liveable wage, have access to affordable housing, health care, food, childcare, etc.)

This leads us to a third consideration: what role should the media play when it comes to addressing the value and role of labour within American society? If the purpose of the media is to educate populations within a given society about the machinations of power, what information, interests, or reasonings are informing the structuration of people's everyday lives, the choices they have available to them (or lack thereof), and how these decisions are being

made within a local, national, and global context, then it would appear that dominant news outlets such as the *NYT*, the *WaPo*, and the *WSJ* are not adequate sites for the public education of the people. If what Robert McChesney attests is true, that "an informed citizenry is the foundation of democracy," then a strong media system is absolutely paramount (2015, p. 55). With the media largely being subsumed under transnational corporations, where the news itself becomes a product competing amongst a myriad of additional and unrelated products produced or sold by these corporations, then the existence of the media becomes intimately bound to the pursuit of profit rather than to the education of the people (Basu, 2018; Herman, 2015; McChesney, 2011, 2015; Gitlin, 2003). This pursuit of profit has historically and contemporarily led to the rampant degradation of labour found within news coverage. A shift away from a capitalistic-oriented news media alongside the emergence of worker-owned media outlets, where the media itself is de-marketized, is integral if the purpose of the news media is assisting in the education of an informed citizenry (McChesney, 2015, 2011; Basu, 2018; Fuchs, 2015; Williams, 1966). As Basu remarks, if we are going "to change the media we need to change society and to change society we need to change the media" (2018, p. 239).

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