

A Hint of Reality on Trade at the Washington Post?

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Sometimes, the most important developments reported in newspapers aren't trumpeted in big, front-page headlines. Sometimes, they're found in the explanatory phrases casually dropped into news articles to provide context or background information – and whose very routine-ness makes them dead-on guides to the stop-and-go evolution of conventional wisdom.

Last Saturday's Washington Post contained one such aside that could mark a genuine inflection point in media coverage of trade and globalization issues. In an article on Sen. John McCain's trade policy speech in Ottawa, Canada, reporter Perry Bacon Jr. (or one of his editors) took pains to instruct readers, "Most economists say that some jobs have moved abroad because of NAFTA and other trade agreements but that the biggest causes of manufacturing job losses are the rise of China and improvements in technology."

Humdrum stuff? Not to us here at GLOBALIZATION FOLLIES. We could have carped about the implication that "other trade agreements" haven't been signed with China since NAFTA launched the Age of Outsourcing in U.S. trade policy. And we could have lamented yet again the ongoing misunderstanding that sees outsourcing-focused trade agreements and productivity improvements as alternative explanations of manufacturing job loss rather than two sides of the same coin – since those responsible for the statistics in Washington acknowledge that their productivity calculations mistakenly equate job offshoring for technological progress.

But the positive desperately needs to be accentuated here: The Post newsroom has apparently decided that China's responsibility for manufacturing job loss is not only significant enough to mention, but also a garden-variety fact – comparable to "Myanmar used to be known as Burma." Until now, this reality has been reported only as a controversial (even fringe) opinion – when it's been mentioned at all. In fact, until now, it seemed verboten in the media to talk about any cost to Americans caused by "the rise of China" – except of course for those poor saps stuck in supposedly third world-type manufacturing jobs that belong in places like China to start with.

Of course, our wish-dream is that this new realization spreads quickly to the nation's other major newsrooms. But let's be realistic. It would represent major progress if this insight could even migrate down the hall to the die-hard trade extremists at the Post editorial page!

(Source: "McCain Defends Trade Pact," by Perry Bacon Jr., The Washington Post, June 21, 2008)