
TRADE UNIONS ONLINE

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Unions 21

Unions 21 exists to support unions to increase their influence, impact and effectiveness within the world of work. We will do this by working with unions, supporters and stakeholders to create an open space for research, innovation and activity to assist unions to secure a better life for working people. This paper is part of its work on Good Work.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This report employs a multi-method research technique to understand how unions are using digital media and, as importantly, how those charged with developing these techniques think about their roles and perceive them fitting into the work of their organisation.

In order to do this, we employ two methods:

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews with union officials working on new media and digital strategies.
- A content analysis of 73 UK trade union websites to understand how and to what extent they are using different types of web communication.

These methods lead to a number of interesting findings, including:

- Some unions have deeply embedded online strategies, while others aspire to have such strategies. Some organisations admit that their online work is largely ad hoc.
- Social media (largely defined as Twitter and Facebook) is seen as a very important tool by many unions. There is a widely held aspiration to do more on different platforms (such as Snapchat and Instagram).
- Unions are employing the internet for a wide variety of activities, including increasing their democratic accountability, campaigning and publicity, digital organising, building their international reputations, and supporting their members professionally. Exactly what they focus on depends on the role that the union seek to play and the culture it subscribes to.
- Unions remain very hierarchical organisations, and retain divisions between professional organisers and lay members. There is also a strong tendency towards centralisation. These tensions are sometimes evident in the way in which digital techniques are deployed.

- Unions are having an on-going discussion about who their audience consists of, and the extent to which it remains the traditional dues-paying member. Our content analysis suggested that union websites do remain quite closed environments.

This report concludes by outlining five challenges and areas of tensions for trade unions in the digital environment: the challenge faced by small unions as digital organising becomes increasingly specialised; decisions about resource allocation as new platforms emerge online; institutional decision making versus the online space; how hierarchical organisations operate in the online space; and what audiences are unions trying to reach.

We do not believe that these tensions need to necessarily be destructive or undermine the work of trade unions. Rather they can be a spur for collaboration and innovation, allowing unions to develop new and effective communication practices online.

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the micro-processor and the development of the internet has made it increasingly common to talk of a “digital revolution”. The changes that these technologies have wrought have had profound ramifications for almost every aspect of life in western societies, ranging across the way we communicate with friends and family, how we get our news and information, the types of environments we work in, and how we shop for goods and services.

For trade unions, these changes are likely to have major consequences. After all, the institutions and ideologies of much of the British trade union movement were created by the last great social and technical upheaval the country went through, the industrial revolution (Pelling, 2016). The profound changes of that time – industrialisation, increased levels of education across the population, the growing political consciousness of a new urban working class – point to the scale of social change that such profound shifts can bring about.

Today, we might be on the cusp of a similar shift in working patterns. Indeed, such changes already seem to be having a profound effect on our economy and working patterns. In 2015, the National Office of Statistics estimated that 4.6 million people in the UK were self-employed. In 2008, only 3.8 million were. While some of this change might have been driven by the post-financial crisis economic environment, the rise is part of a larger trend evident since 2000 when 3.3 million people were self-employed (National Office of Statistics, 2015). At least part of this rise is fuelled by companies – the most famous example being Uber – which use technology to enable radically different working patterns and challenge a pre-existing industry leaders (Cramer and Krueger, 2016).

Even for employees in more traditional work environments, technology is having a huge impact on their working patterns. Laptops, tablets and smart phones enable remote work. This is a double edged-sword, with working patterns having the potential to become more flexible to suit the individual, but also with the risk of a growing

perception that employees must always be “on call”, with concurrent increases in stress and undermining of work-life balance (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, it might be the case that the distribution of these new opportunities and burdens increases pre-existing structural inequalities, particularly around gender (Perrons, 2003). Unsurprisingly then, in both government and the trade union movement, serious reflection is starting to take place on what these changing work patterns mean (Runge and Wright, 2017, Taylor, 2017).

As important for trade unions though is thinking about how technology changes the way in which they can support and represent their members. Certainly, academic research of new technologies suggests that two area core to trade union activity – namely, the provision of services and organising political campaigns – are changing dramatically because of technological innovation.

Central to understanding this development is going beyond seeing it in singular terms. Technological change can provide both opportunities and risks for an organisation, very likely at the same time. Furthermore, the way in which organisations adapt to this change is inevitably situated in a wider social, institutional, ideological and political context (Anstead and Chadwick, 2008).

This means we need to understand the relationship between trade unions at both the macro-, meso- and micro-level. At the macro-level, we need to consider the extent to which older institutional arrangements, organising principles and ideologies are challenged by and relate to the affordances of new technologies. Put simply, if – as been argued by several leading thinkers in this field (see for example: Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, Bimber et al., 2005) – older models of collective action are usurped by new modes of political cooperation, where does that leave the traditional trade union structure of local branches and annual conferences? Can such structures compete with alternative, looser forms of political participation, and should they attempt to?

At the meso-level, specific unions and industry sectors will have their own circumstances that need to be considered when thinking about how best to use technology in new and innovative ways. Most obviously, this might mean that the online communication strategies for a small specialist union are very different to those used by a large multi-sector organisation. To properly understand this, it is important to develop a granular research approach, drawing on a range of different types of organisations.

Finally, at the micro-level, there is a lot to learn about individual members in a rapidly evolving technological environment and how can unions best connect with them. It is important to appreciate how rapidly the goalposts are moving. In the past two decades, the internet has moved from being something that was accessed via a desktop PC (often over a dial-up modem connection) to being something that most of the population carry around with them in their pockets on increasingly powerful smartphones. Companies such as Google (founded 1998) and Facebook (founded 2004) have gone from tiny start-ups to being some of the most influential corporations in the history of modern capitalism. The online environment and how we interact with it is continually and rapidly changing.

As well as understanding the changing online environment and how it is used by their members, it is also important to understand exactly who is taking advantage of the opportunities it presents. These changes may be positive. It is possible, for example, that online spaces can provide new forms of democratic accountability more accessible to those who have been marginalised in more traditional union forums. But the converse might also be true – new opportunities, if taken by those who are already advantaged can actually re-enforce structural inequality (Hindman, 2008).

These are the challenges this report tries to address by providing a broad overview of how a sample of UK trade unions are currently using the internet and thinking about why those practices have evolved in the way that they have.

EXISTING LITERATURE AND RESEARCH ON TRADE UNIONS AND THE INTERNET

In the time since the advent of the internet, significant changes have occurred in the way trade unions use new media technologies. As these changes have often happened very rapidly, they have proved hard to document in studies on the topic. While they may remain theoretically relevant, even studies published five years ago may no longer reflect the current empirical situation.

That said, the historical evolution of union online activities remains worthy of consideration as it has developed in tandem with the capabilities of the medium. Early incarnations of the web (what have been termed Web 1.0 implementations) focused on one-way direct communication, providing limited opportunities for interaction. The development of Web 2.0 technologies was marked by a greater emphasis on user generated and user organised content (O'Reilly, 2004). Sites such as YouTube and Facebook provide the archetype examples of Web 2.0. These are environments where users can actively participate, produce and share information, as well as construct networks with like-minded people and social actors.

Study of trade unions' use of the internet has, to some extent, reflected this trajectory of development. Although they were sometimes considered to be "latecomers" to using new technology, union websites have gradually moved from being "brochure ware" to promote a more interactive relationship with members (Greene, 2005). Furthermore, while early studies suggested that British trade unions were some way behind their international partners in adopting these new communication techniques (Ward and Lusoli, 2003), this gap now appears to be closed. Certainly, UK-based trade unions have been systematically improving their online presence in recent years (Hodder, 2015) trying to reach out mainly to young workers and increase both their membership numbers and the reach of their campaigns among the wider public and would-be supporters. As a result, unions have increasingly been engaging with

social media which is now widely recognised as essential if trade unions are to achieve this kind of outreach (Bailey et al., 2010).

The simplest question raised about relation to new communication technology and trade union whether technological developments be good or bad news for trade unions, and whether it will help or hinder them in their core tasks? Some studies have taken a strongly optimistic standpoint and predicted that new technology could bring about renewal, leading to increased democratisation, easier mobilisation of activists and supporters, stronger relations across the international labour community, or more and better services being provided for trade union members (Diamond and Freeman, 2002). The alternative viewpoint – namely, that new ICT will undermine trade unions has been less prominent – although some have made this argument, pointing to potentially negative impact on unions' renewal (Troy, 2001), and the possibility of fragmentation as unions are faced by rival political organisations employing new methods of mobilisation (Chaison, 2005). These pessimistic views have often been situated in a wider concern about the long-term viability of trade unions, especially in the context of continuing decline in membership from the high point of the late 1970s (The Department for Business, 2017).

These concerns are largely based on the idea that unions are not very nimble organisations. Put simply, how do organisations that have a tradition of hierarchy and bureaucratic organisation compete with political movements (for example the anti-World Trade Organisation protests at the turn of the century or the Occupy movement in the 2010s) that are much more reliant on self-organization, and have horizontal, post-bureaucratic structures (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012)? That said, it is worth noting though that the same arguments have been made to underline the potential of new communication technology, which could allow unions to communicate more effectively with workers in non-traditional and geographically

disparate work environments or in firms that actively make it hard for their employees to join unions (Taylor, 2017).

Going beyond the idea of new media as simply being “good” or “bad” for unions, more nuanced arguments have emerged that have situated new technology in the institutional and cultural environment of the trade union movement (Diamond and Freeman, 2002). Smaller unions, for example, seem to be better at adopting new media technologies (Greene et al., 2003). More worryingly, there is a risk that decisions over whether to adopt new communication technologies can become subsumed into wider conflict within unions between communities of practice or different elements of the organisational hierarchy (Martínez Lucio, 2003). This literature has focused more on the overall state of trade unions and the various factors limiting their membership. As a result, it has warned against seeing new media as a panacea. Martínez Lucio (2003) and Hodder (2015) have argued that there are various external factors undermining trade unions and, as a result, membership levels cannot be a useful indicator of how effectively trade unions are using information communication technology.

It is also dangerous to assume that technological adoption occurs based purely on a rational, utility-driven basis. Ideas and the culture within trade unions can also play a significant role in the decision-making process (Lucio et al., 2009). Strategy and the selection of communication channels are mediated by environmental factors, especially the attitudes of leadership, and whether they are in favour of a process of modernisation within an organisations structures (Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015).

Trade union adoption of information communication technology is still an ongoing process which poses many challenges. One of the most important of these is the age of union members, which tends to be higher than the rest of the population. This in turn raises questions about the types of skills these union members have, and whether moving activities and resources online would make them accessible to this group. As such, unions – with the twin goals of retaining the communication channels they currently enjoy with older members and reaching out to younger members in new ways – might end up having to duplicate huge amounts of work both on- and offline.

RCM and e-learning

Seven years ago, the RCM introduced i-learn, its e-learning platform. The union found that midwives were finding it increasingly more difficult to get time away from work to attend training courses alongside the need to make it easier to access learning on certain topics. Since its introduction, the platform has become invaluable as part of professional revalidation (midwives are required to revalidate on a three yearly basis). In order to meet revalidation requirements, midwives need to demonstrate they have undertaken 35 hours of CPD and i-learn provides access to a range of courses that help midwives meet these requirements. The RCM also provides i-folio, an online portfolio, in which to record learning and reflection on practice.

Over the last three years, almost half of the members (20,000) have actively engaged with the platform which is run using moodle. In total, 100 modules are available covering midwifery specific and wider work related topics. This work is delivered by a small team consisting of a midwife educator (ensuring content meets the RCM standards and provides accurate information), a learning technologist (learning design and the more technical aspects of the system) and a proof-reader who also assists with some of the learning design.

The strongest aspect of the project is the evidence that so many midwives, student midwives and support workers are accessing i-learn on a regular basis and consider it to be a valued part of the membership offer. The union now has organisations asking to deliver important messages to do the reach within the industry.

The platform is regularly monitored and evaluated, with modules reflecting both member and industry need. It is currently under review of content to improve the look and feel of the user experience as well as streamlining the processes of commissioning work and automating the review timelines.

WHAT CAN UNIONS LEARN FROM THIS WORK?

- a. Ensure the technology that you use will meet your needs on an ongoing basis and that it is flexible and sustainable as the learning offer grows and develops.
- b. It is fine to start off small. Don't expect to have all your content immediately available. Let the system evolve over time.
- c. Keep it simple. Make sure the log on process is as easy as possible and that users know exactly what to do once they enter the e-learning platform.
- d. Keep modules short. The feedback from RCM members was that they much prefer modules under 30 minutes in length.
- e. Refresh content regularly providing new learning opportunities to ensure that your members remain regular visitors to the e-learning platform.

Online discussion forums for national ballots on pensions and redundancy compensation

On the back of the Independent Public Service Pensions Commission report by John Hutton in 2011, civil service redundancy terms have been reviewed shortly after each of the last three general elections. At each round of review, there is no doubt that the outcomes were much better because of the collective impact of members on the processes but the final agreements often had disagreeable elements to them.

The difficulty faced during these reviews was how can reps, officials and crucially members be involved who are around the country, may not be there when meetings are held and may have different levels of knowledge about the impact of the proposals. Prospect's website already had the functionality for a member-only forum and therefore, it was decided to make use of this ability, managed in-house by the communications team.

From the beginning, members could post anonymously (as there could be genuine reasons why members preferred anonymity) therefore, the forum had ground rules relating to conduct on the forum was thought to be a better way to manage

potential abuse (the feedback and questions were sometimes more challenging than at face-to-face meetings). It was envisioned that engagement from members was likely to take the form of questions about the handling of the negotiations or the impact of the proposed agreement. Due to this, it was important for officers involved in the negotiations to monitor the discussions and quickly respond. To facilitate this, email alerts were set up for the relevant officers. This prompt response time was crucial in addressing misinformation on the agreement which could lead to a particular view.

Responding appropriately to critical views of the agreement was really important. A major feature of the forum was the amount of negative feedback on the deal that was received, much more so than in most face to face meetings. However, some members posed more than once under pseudonyms to give the impression that certain views were more representative than they were. This was detected and called out under the terms of the ground rules.

A few dozen members actively engaged in these forums by asking questions about details or giving opinions on the proposals. These pages formed an important section of the parts of the website dedicated to the ballots that had thousands of views during those periods.

WHAT CAN UNIONS LEARN FROM THIS WORK?

- a. Online forums are worth doing if they engage members and produce useful feedback – the more high profile or controversial the better engagement you're likely to get.
- b. Tone is really important. It's easily misinterpreted and responses are up for everyone to read, so really consider what you're saying and how it can be interpreted. It's important to respond points, whether you agree with them or not in a respectful manner.
- c. Reps and officials can generate union engagement by promoting the forum.
- d. Think about how a forum relates to other media channels – it's likely to wax and wane in interest so don't worry about keeping it updated all of the time.

ANALYSIS

In-depth interviews

Our interviews suggested several interesting themes in terms of how trade unions use and think about new media as a tool.

EXPERTISE, HIERARCHY AND STRATEGY

Across the organisations we spoke to, digital strategy was at a variety of points of development. In some unions, formal strategies existed and were being practiced. Others aspired to have a strategy as some point in the future. Others were perfectly willing to admit that their digital work remained largely ad-hoc.

One of the reasons why digital is challenging for any existing and long-established institution is that it is an area requiring high levels of expertise that might not pre-exist in that organisation, and which might also cut across a variety of existing specialisms (information technology, communications, campaigns, and member services for example). It is for this reason it might be hard to integrate this new skillset into a union.

Our sample suggested that, especially in smaller unions, online communication was often undertaken as part of a portfolio of responsibilities by individuals or team. For example, one interviewee defined their role as being:

Part of the management team with the responsibility for research, legal, pensions, communications, and the IT functions. Which doesn't mean a specialist any of those (member of the senior management team in a multi-sector union for professionals. See also senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

More generally, there was a challenge for smaller organisations in developing the types of capabilities required to fully exploit the potential of online communication. The challenge here was not just technical, but also human resource based, as smaller unions simply lacked the staff required to undertake very labour intensive activities, such as moderating online discussion (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17).

Unions are complex and multi-faceted institutions, and this was reflected in how new media was discussed and understood. On the one hand, unions are quite hierarchical organisations, with traditional structures to facilitate participation and a professional cohort of officials. On the other hand, they are membership-based organisations with a significant number of lay officials and members.

It was striking that several of our interviewees mentioned the role of new media in relationship to the managerial hierarchy of their organisation, referencing the ultimate responsibility of the General Secretary or the Executive, or their own desire to centralise control:

Well it [online communication] falls within the team rather than on an individual, but ultimately it will be the General Secretary who has overall responsibility (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17).

You become more devolved in your communications and you therefore have much less control over the content... I think culturally, I am deeply centrist person, as the most people at the centre of trade unions (Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17).

Of course, it could be argued that these comments could be made on any organisation, whether it is corporate, public sector or civic, where authority is ultimately vested in an individual or group, within a centralised institution. But what is most striking is how union officials were so quick to point this out. It is hard to say whether this is indicative of a chain of leadership where senior officials do micro-manage the roll out of new technologies or whether it reflects a broader culture of hierarchy, but the result would likely be the same – relatively slow moving institutional structures which struggle to adopt to rapid change.

Another organisational tension within unions is between the professional arm of the organisation and the lay membership. Organisations had come up with a variety of ways to manage this tension. One particularly emblematic example we found related to the management of a union's social media accounts. These were nominally run by lay members, but access and passwords were

controlled by the professional communication teams, so they had the ability to delete any posted content that problematic (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17). These types of arrangements are indicative of broader challenge thrown up by new media, and the extent to which unions decentralised control around this new mechanism of communication.

There were also some signs of integration. After all, it should be remembered that new media is not really all that new and many unions will have been thinking about these issues for more than two decades. Certainly, in some organisations, there was a desire for professional expertise to be shared:

Now were kinda moving to a model where a department will come to us and say 'we want to raise awareness' or 'we know that members need this kind of advice, how do you suggest we go about it?' and then we would have a multichannel approach to that question (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

WHAT TYPES OF INTERNET TOOLS ARE UNIONS USING?

For many unions in our sample, the most reliable online tool remained email, with many organisations having lists that covered almost their entire membership (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17). Interestingly, some unions also saw this as a tool to reach out beyond their membership-base, gathering larger databases of email addresses that they could then use for recruitment and campaigning (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

Unsurprisingly, given the data in our content analysis, our interviews found that unions were not only using their own websites and email but increasingly reliant on social media (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17; Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17) with Twitter and especially Facebook being considered the most essential communication channels. The latter was not only being used in the more organic way of creating groups and pages, but some unions were also increasingly experimenting with advertising in the Facebook eco-system, to reach both members and would-be members (Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17; senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17). This environment did pose challenges though.

Some unions worked with large Facebook groups that they had not set up nor controlled. Instead, they had been created by independent members (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17). While none of the unions we interviewed detailed any problems this had created, it is not hard to imagine a scenario where such activities cause confusion about the official position of the union or risk the brand cohesion of the organisation.

As well as using ubiquitous social tools like Facebook and Twitter, some unions are trying to use much more innovative technology. One example we found was an organisation that was trying to livestream videos of its meeting, so as they could be watched by supporters all over the country (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17). Other attempts at innovation were less successful. In one example, web forums had turned out to be hugely labour intensive, requiring huge amounts of time and effort to moderate (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17)

THE USES OF THE INTERNET

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that our sample consisted of a wide range of unions from different sectors and with different traditions, we found that new media was being used for a huge variety of activities.

Improving democratic accountability and participation among members was something that many of the union officials we spoke to at least aspired to do, although some were willing to admit their efforts had not yet proved wholly successful (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17).

While the desire to democratise and bring unions closer to members was real, our interviewees also perceived several possible problems that could emerge through increasing participation among members online. One potential problem is a longstanding issue with web-based democratic initiatives – namely, how and to what extent do you police them to prevent a descent in nastiness. Some unions already had experience of this problem, with one official telling us “We have seen some really negative stuff on there, people sitting in darkened rooms and being unrestrained about what they are saying” (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17). The challenge here is

that managing online democratic environments to a high standard is both philosophically difficult (in that it requires a community to define the boundaries of acceptable speech) and labour intensive, as those rules then have to be administered.

Another challenge relates to the representativeness of participants in online spaces:

We don't really mind this as it can alert us to what is wrong, and what we can do better, but we have to be careful that it doesn't skew our strategy as a minority of people can make a lot of noise (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17).

The problem here is a classic issue in political theory (see for example Schattschneider, 1960), wherein democratic opportunities are only taken up by a small proportion of those eligible to do so, giving a warped sense of the popular will. This creates two potential (and seemingly contradictory) problems for unions, both related to their more traditional democratic apparatus. Unions are sometimes accused of struggling as democratic organisations due to low levels of engagement. While this observation is often made for political purposes by critics of the union movement, it is certainly the case that some trade union elections have a very low turnout. In scenarios where this is occurring, the first possibility is that the online space could be co-opted by the small group of activists, and thus do nothing to enhance the democratic life of the organisation. The second scenario is that the online space is successful in democratic terms and brings new participants into engaging with the union. The challenge this raises is how the online space then relates to the more traditional and historically sovereign, formal democratic institutions of a union.

Another tension raised using the internet as a democratic participatory tool is how it relates to the professional/bureaucratic aspects of the trade union movement. Some of our interviewees argued that web strategy generally was a professional activity, so should be removed from the member-driven/democratic aspects of trade union life

marketing is one area where there has been very little sign off [from members] and in our opinion, rightly so, because we're the experts. There would be a strategic approach which we would take as experts where we're kinda looking at that kinda thing and then there would be a digital democracy aimed at

members and in my mind at least they are two quite separate things (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

This response is interesting because it suggests that we should not think of a single internet strategy for unions, but rather think about new media in the context of the traditional divisions of labour (and the tensions that these create) within the trade union movement.

Another activity where unions were seeking to employ the internet was as a campaigning and publicity tool. In part, it was a tool to reach out to the mainstream, traditional media in the hope of gaining press and broadcast coverage (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17). Additionally, new media was a way of reaching out to political elites and mobilising activists through digital organising to lobby them on issues that were important:

[W]e worked on a campaign called [removed], which was really around member advocacy to MPs and we organised a number of events, which were actually invite only and quite small, and aimed at opinion formers and were quite London based, but a large part of that was social [media] activity around those events which allowed members across the country to really engage with them, and that's the first time that we really felt 'ooh' (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17).

At the more sophisticated end of the spectrum, officials argued that digital organising was particularly powerful because of its immediacy, measurability and targeting capabilities. In short, they could attempt to mobilise the types of members who might be interested in taking part in campaigns and find very quickly in numeric terms if their efforts were working (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17; Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17).

Some of the unions in our sample which also saw themselves as having a professional function saw the web as an important tool for providing resources for practitioners in other countries, essentially acting as an international repository of professional information (Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17).

Several unions in our sample used the internet as a tool to attempt to recruit new members (the challenges of recruiting new members is discussed

under audience, below).

Depending on how they see their function, unions were also using the web as a tool to help their members in professional development. One union for example was creating a tool where members could store information on their continuing professional development (CPD) records. The attitude in this organisation was that this was a service they could now provide for their members, facilitated by the internet (Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17).

AUDIENCE

One of the most interesting and complicated debates that emerged in our interviews was exactly who unions were catering for in their online activities. Unions have, of course, traditionally provided services and support primarily for their dues-paying members. To provide benefits to non-members opens the risk of what economists term the “free rider problem” i.e. that non-members will receive the same benefits as members, thus dis-incentivising people from joining in the first place. The web complicates the free rider problem considerably, because (arguably) it is a media that best achieves its potential when openness and accessibility are prioritised.

Certainly, some of our interviewees seemed aware of this trade off, and were seeking compromise positions:

[W]e’ve just introduced a sort of wall, but it’s not really a wall. Basically you need an account to look at our help and advice, but anyone can create an account, you don’t have to be a member, so I think that’s just acknowledging that if you’re going to read our stuff, we want your email address so we can try and sell you a membership” (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

One of the themes that came out during our interviews was that union officials saw the web as a powerful recruitment tool (see also Communications Officer Number 2 of small specialist union, 22/03/17). This is an entirely sensible way of using the web, but it is also an argument that helps reconcile the desire for openness online with the challenge of the free rider problem – unions can have reasonably open and accessible content, but with the aim of integrating web-users into their more traditional membership

structure.

Other officials offered a more radical argument, seeing potential of the internet as a tool to reach out beyond members and would-be members.

We don’t want to limit social media to our members, we want to show any professionals who are not members what we do, and also letting the general public know what our profession is (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17).

Communications is a way of projecting what the union does to the outside world as well as to members (Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17).

The argument here is slightly different. These union officials see the internet as a tool to reach out to the wider public, both about the profession they represent and their organisation. Of course, catering to this variety of audiences is not necessarily contradictory. Websites can contain different areas for different people. Nevertheless, in the real world, organisations have finite resources and time, so decisions will have to be taken about exactly which audience is prioritised.

Another audience-related challenge for unions is the extent to which their membership has the necessary skills and desire to access and use online communication methods. In part, this is a question of preferences. Many of the unions we spoke to still produce huge amounts of paper-based content, simply because many of their members prefer magazines and newsletters (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17). This is especially true of unions with an older membership, who might be less comfortable with digital communication (Assistant General Secretary of small specialist union, 22/03/17, Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17). Some unions are proactively trying to resolve these problems by offering training for their members, to help them develop the skills required to get online (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

One interesting challenge highlighted by one union occurred when the lay institutions of union coincided with a lack of digital skills (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17). In this case, local branches tended to be run by retired members of the profession. They in turn tended to be older and less comfortable with digital communication. While these people were vital to the

functioning of the union, they also acted as a brake on the development of online communications, which – ironically – might suit current working members far better than traditional, paper-based modes of communication.

Across the unions we spoke to, there was also a recognition that there is no universally effective strategy. This is because the experience of work that members of various professions have is so diverse. Some people are at desks with access to computers all day, while some only have access to the internet through a smartphone. Others have no access at all during their working day (Director of a Sector Specific Union, 05/04/17). These differences of audience are vitally important as unions think about their online strategy.

At the more cutting edge of union online communication, organisations increasingly do not see audiences as either passive received nor as homogenous, but instead are more interested in creating a two-way and personalised dialogue. When building new online tools, for example, some unions now undertake significant member research exercises, including focus groups and surveys (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17). In common with the broader evolution of the web, there is also a desire to help users personalise their content, so as they can receive the information that is most useful and relevant to them (senior digital and marketing officer, sector specific union, 06/03/17).

THE FUTURE

While both our interviews and content analysis suggest that unions are doing a lot of work with Facebook and Twitter, there is clearly a desire to employ additional platforms in the future:

[W]e need to do a lot more. We do Facebook, Twitter, a little bit of linked-in, but we don't use other channels that are available, but we think we should do Instagram and SnapChat" (Director of Marketing of a small specialist union, 30/03/17).

Innovation of this kind is clearly good, but these new platforms also present risks for unions. Online communication strategy can often fetishize the new at the expense of asking about the utility of a social media environment. There is a danger that unions pour significant amounts of resources into new technologies when they add little value to their offer.

Additionally, by trying to communicate across a very wide-range of platforms, unions risk spreading their efforts too thinly.

Content analysis of trade union websites

The content analysis of union websites points towards some interesting insights into how new media is being used and where unions are directing their energies.

Percentage of surveyed union websites using:

Images	97.2%
Video	26.4%
Audio	4.2%

Obviously, one of the great virtues of web communication is that it can act as a conduit for a variety of rich media. The advent of relatively cheap digital cameras and the ubiquity of smart phones, plus the capabilities of sites such as YouTube make it very easy to produce and share video content, for example. However, this apparent ease of production and dissemination is deceptive. Making professional and effective video communication remains a complex undertaking, requiring a high level of expertise. It is perhaps this this reason why only just over a quarter of the unions in our sample (26.4 per cent) were using video on their websites. An even smaller proportion (4.2 per cent) are using their site to distribute audio content.

This example underlines a fundamental truth about web communication – while the barriers to producing simple content may be lower, to engage with this media in a strategic and useful way remains very resource and skills intensive. This might especially be the case for smaller unions, who are not capable of holding the type of expertise required to produce professional and polished media projects in-house. It may also be an example where the pooling of resources between unions can produce better results.

Site	Not used	'Follow us' button	Content from	Both button and content
Facebook	23.6	75	0	1.4
Twitter	20.8	43.1	2.8	33.3
YouTube	70.8	23.6	2.8	2.8
LinkedIn	79.2	20.8	0	0
Instagram	94.4	5.6	0	0

Another relevant question which is address by our content analysis is the extent to which unions are engaging with social media generally, and – if they are using these types of sites at all – exactly which services they are using. In this case, we were interested in how they embedded or publicised their presence on social media on their website.

As would perhaps be expected, the most prominent social networks are the most used, with more than three quarters of unions using Facebook, marginally less than the nearly eighty per cent who use Twitter. As per the finding above on rich text, YouTube is used rather less, with 70.8 per cent of unions not using the site. Use of LinkedIn is also low (79.2 per cent of unions do not use the site). That this figure is quite low is perhaps surprising that. While different unions have different functions, some of our interviewees did talk in terms of their unions fostering professional networks, helping their members find work and record progression in their careers. In unions with this aspiration, LinkedIn would seem a potentially useful tool. Instagram was also barely used by unions (94.4 per cent of unions did not use it). This was not surprising. In our interviews, very often Instagram (along with other new social networks, such as WhatsApp and Snapchat) were held up as new environments which organisations aspired to use, but had not yet either developed understanding of nor allocated resources for.

It is also interesting to ask how unions are using these social sites. Interestingly, their does appear to be a difference evident here. Twitter is much more commonly used to embed content on a website (in total 36.1 per cent of all unions sampled embedded Twitter content on their website). In contrast, Facebook was much more clearly linked to as a separate environment (only 1.4 per cent of unions were actually publishing Facebook generated content on their website, while fully 76.4 per cent of unions had some kind of “button” linking to

Facebook). This reflects the idea that Facebook is a much more complete eco-system than Twitter and other social media environments, distinct from the rest of the web.

This has important ramifications for how unions might use Facebook. While this study looked at union front pages as a proxy for how social media was used, it is entirely possible that unions might encounter members and would-be supporters on Facebook who never access their website. This raises interesting questions about resource allocation, the particular needs of this audience (as distinct from the web-based audience) and the extent to which unions can, should and are able to exploit the underlying data architecture of Facebook (including techniques like targeted advertising).

Another question we could address is the extent to which web content is used to drive trade union's offline activities. This is important because of a tension in the academic debate about new media and political activity. One school of thought suggests that older institutions will struggle to compete with the more fluid, adaptable types of relationships that can be formed through new media (Shirky, 2009). However, it might also be argued that new media has the potential make existing institutions better and more accessible. In other words, can new media help organisations do what they have always done, but do it better?

Percentage of surveyed union websites using:

Details of national meetings/conference	84.3%
Details of local branches	79.2%
Details of ongoing campaigns	77.8%

Here our data is promising, albeit with an important caveat. 84.3 per cent of trade unions had details of national meeting and conferences on their website, while nearly the same amount of had details of local branches and information on

ongoing campaigns. The caveat is of course that our research cannot provide evidence that unions members are choosing to access these documents, even if they are accessible.

The previous content analysis has been fairly descriptive in nature, albeit informed by academic debates about the internet. It is perhaps more interesting to think about a broader theoretical question about the role of unions in society, who they are seeking to communicate with, and how this influences their web strategy. One challenge that came out of our interview was in terms of unions providing web content for their members as opposed to providing content for a more general audience. Their arguments on either side of this debate. Unions are keen to recruit members. One strategy to do this is to provide exclusive benefits, such as access to information. However, sealing off content in this way may also make it harder for unions to reach out to other audiences, such as non-members.

Unsurprisingly, unions have taken adopted different strategies, ranging from closing off content exclusively for members to throwing their whole website open to everyone. This spectrum of open to closed is shown below.

What is striking though is the extent to which content produced by trade unions retain member exclusive areas. 84.7 per cent of unions are areas of their website that contain membership only content. Progressing down the spectrum, some unions (6.9 per cent) also have two “walled-garden” areas, one for members and another area required registration with the website. A smaller number (2.7 per cent) have an area which is accessible by registering with the site. 5.6 per cent of sites are completely open, with no member only areas, nor any area requiring registration.

This is not to suggest that one approach, either open or closed, is the correct method for unions to adopt. However, the advantages and disadvantages of each approach needs to be factored into strategic decision making, with reflection on the exact audiences that unions are trying to reach.



CONCLUSIONS: FIVE CHALLENGES FOR UNIONS

For unions, new media poses both a challenge and threat. These challenges and threats are partially exogenous (related to the changing world of work and social implications this has) but also endogenous, as new media will inevitably mean big changes to the way unions are going to operate in the future and the expectation that their members will have of them. This conclusion outlines five particular challenges that need to be considered:

1. Size of unions and increasing specialisation

One challenge that is already apparent is that online is now a very specialist field of communication. This tendency is only going to increase in the future, as the skills required to engage in online communication become even more high level. For example, will unions have the kind of expertise required to engage in segmentation targeting or to employ big datasets? This choice is easier for larger unions, who can hire specialists into full time posts. For smaller unions, where individual employees may have multiple responsibilities, this is a much harder challenge to face. Consultants may be an option, but they will remain expensive. One possibility is the pooling of resources among small unions to put high-level skills within their reach.

2. Resource allocation and developing new capabilities

With finite resources, where should unions put their money? This is a particularly challenging question in an environment that evolves as rapidly as the web, where new platforms are constantly being created. Our interviews did sometimes pick up a desire to be on every platform. This might be a good strategy, if there was an audience to be picked up in this way. But unions need to be aware of the dangers of fetishizing the new and spreading themselves too thinly across multiple platforms. Decisions of this kind need to be taken with reference to a broader strategy and with clear aims in mind (Who do I want to reach? Why do I want to reach them? How can I reach them?)

3. Institutional versus the online

Unions have long-established institutions for decision making and member engagement. It is important to ask how any new online participatory environments will add to and relate to these institutions. It might be that they have the potential to make them better by, for example, increasing membership participation in union decision making. The risk is that the two end up contradicting each other and come into conflict. This then leads to a clash of two different democratic legitimacies, which could be deeply damaging to an organisation.

4. Hierarchy versus the organic

Online organisation has the potential to look very different to traditional collective action. While traditional political organisations tend to be hierarchical in shape, online organisations are flatter and potentially more spontaneous. This is important because hierarchy is embedded deeply in union culture, especially among those who work for unions. There will clearly be a tension between these two ideas. The challenge for unions is to make that a creative, fertile tension that fuels new ideas about organising rather than a destructive one which undermines their organisation.

5. Audiences

As outlined above, one of the major challenges unions face is how to reconcile their traditional membership model with the openness that exists online. Who exactly are they trying to reach through their online communications? Can they sustain multiple online presences for different audiences effectively? It seems likely that there is no “correct” answer to this conundrum, but rather than different unions in different industries will find solutions that work for them. However, the question of audience is one that every union should be actively considering.

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