

# **Cyberunions:**

*New technologies, distributed discourse and  
union renewal*

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# Dedication

*To my mother, who started me on this journey by teaching me how to read*

*To my partner Talitha, for love and support*

*To my Ancestors*

*To all the comrades whose voices form part of my story*

## Acknowledgments

Despite the fact that my name is on the front of this document, a work of this nature is a collaborative effort, and I owe a great debt to the very many trade union activists who have assisted me over the years. Comrades in South Africa: Toon Dietrich, Mandy Moussouris, Charley Lewis, Martin Jansen and Workers' World, Terry Bell, Anna Majavu, Peter van Heusden and the Ultras. I would like to thank Lyn Turner, Mike Kidd and my colleagues at Unite; the Unite Organising team in Scotland for enthusiastically embracing new technology; my supervisor Peter Dwyer; my teachers at Ruskin, Sue Ledwith and Ian Manborde; my fellow students at Ruskin for support and friendship; Eric Lee of LabourStart; Peter Waterman; and the reps at CCISUA for graciously hosting me at their conference.

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation looks at the impact and potential of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) on union renewal and revitalisation, paying particular attention to low cost, Web 2.0 experimentation by activists. Unions are behind the curve with regard to ICT issues, and frequently fail to grasp the cultural and political implications of new technologies. The iconoclasm of Internet culture is at odds with the centralised control of many trade union structures. Consequently, there is much discussion about the potential for ICTs to 'distribute discourse', leading to increased trade union democracy and responsiveness to members' needs, as well as drawing in and giving a voice to new groups of workers. Workers in sectors of the economy under represented by the trade union movement, as well as women, ethnic minority and young workers, can use technology to bypass trade union structures that exclude them. While there is a fairly substantial literature on the impact of centralised campaigns, and by activists with high levels of technical skill, there has been very little exploration of decentralised campaigns driven by Web 2.0 and social media. Can social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter, accessed through smart phones and other readily accessible devices, provide unique opportunities? Technology, used strategically, could play a leading role in the union renewal project. But is it a panacea for arresting union decline, or can it only be used tactically to reinforce offline campaigns to improve workplace organisation, build structures and increase collective bargaining coverage? Much of the literature on cyberunionism fails to consider the wider context of software use and the Internet. This dissertation attempts to address this by exploring the Free and Open Source Software movement and Creative Commons, and arguing that unions need to join social movements

campaigning to keep the Internet as a free public sphere, outside of the control of large corporations. It will address the digital divide by comparing the experience of activists in the UK with the experience of trade unionists in South Africa, where Internet penetration is much lower, and there are additional barriers, such as language, to overcome before making full use of the technology. By participant observation, interviewing key practitioners, surveying activists and conducting action research with a group of union organisers experimenting with ICT, it concludes that the future for trade unions is to relinquish control and encourage wide experimentation amongst activists. Unions also need to educate their members to use ICTs and social media for organising.

Key words: Cyberunions; ICT; social media; union organising; union renewal; distributed discourse; network communities; open source

## **1. Introduction**

### **Technological change**

Technological advances over a generation have led to a shift in the political economy around the world. In entering the information age, we are, we are told, seeing a change as fundamental as that from feudalism to the industrial revolution (Freeman and Louçã 2001). New technologies have changed the way we live and work, and, some argue (Žižek 2009), changed the philosophy we live by. Modernism, with its narrative of cause and effect, and sense of history, has collapsed into a post-modern relativism. Technologically enhanced consumer culture has seen a retreat into individualism (Beniger 1997), particularly in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, and less engagement with collective projects such as political parties, trade unions and social movements.

Information technology has allowed business to adopt entirely new management techniques (Freeman and Louçã 2001), including unprecedented surveillance and monitoring of employee performance (Lee 2008). There has also been a major shift in the way goods and services are produced: ICTs have allowed production to be distributed around the world, with components of a finished article – a car, for instance, or a computer – being created in different countries, and assembled 'just in time'.

### **Trade union crisis**

These technological changes have allowed the ideological opponents of the labour movement to mount unprecedented attacks on trade union's traditional areas of

strength. This has led to a serious decline in the strength and influence of unions from the early 1980s onwards (Hyman 2004; Munck 1999), undermining the unions' ability to influence or control the process of production. The terrain unions are contesting is fundamentally different from the environment they evolved in, and they have, largely, failed to adequately adapt to changed circumstances (Behrens et al 2004).

### **Research questions**

The central question this dissertation will examine is, "can trade unions facilitate renewal and revitalisation by embracing new technologies?" If the hierarchical organisational forms that trade unions currently take are inadequate for representing workers in a rapidly changing world, can ICTs facilitate an organisational model that is more fluid, dynamic and responsive to the needs of members, yet still accountable and effective? Greene et al (2003) argue that ICTs create horizontal networks of activists that can revitalise trade union structures from the ground up, by challenging unresponsive hierarchies and demanding that unions become more representative of the workers they aim to represent. I intend to test this idea: do ICTs distribute discourse, and allow for a greater mobilisation of activists? Do ICTs allow for the development of more horizontal networks, or do they undermine legitimate trade union structures?

New technologies have been heralded as offering a new opportunity for unions to organise, and some trade union activists have embraced the Internet – the LabourStart<sup>1</sup> website being a well known example that has very effectively mobilised



international solidarity campaigns. Has this potential been met? Trade union attitudes to new technology are complicated by the fact that these technologies are usually introduced by business to improve productivity, with obvious negative consequence for members' terms and conditions. Does this result in a failure to fully realise the opportunities on offer? If ICTs do make a difference, then how? What are activists and practitioners using? Are these technologies used primarily for one way communication between the union and its members, or are we genuinely seeing a democratised, distributed discourse, where ordinary activists and members are shaping the agenda? Who are the actors? Rank and file activists, or paid employees of the union?

### **Focus on practitioners using Web 2.0**

There is a substantial body of literature addressing both the potential and practice of cyberunionism. However this has not kept pace with the speed of technological advancement, and tends to deal with technology with fairly high barriers to entry, for the example the ability to create websites by coding HTML. In the past five years, developments in technology have substantially lowered the barriers to access and made user-generated content the norm. This new development is widely referred to as 'Web 2.0', in contrast to 'Web 1.0', the old, static Internet that required technical expertise to use. Most of the literature fails to deal with the implications of Web 2.0. A substantial part of my research will be in evaluating these new tools, and finding out whether they really do offer something new. Can smart phones, giving access to social media tools, provide unique opportunities? Where, for example, is the trade

union iPhone app?<sup>21</sup> I will pay particular attention to low cost, Web 2.0 experimentation by activists.

### **The Digital Divide**

What about the digital divide? - “the troubling gap between those who use computers and the Internet and those who do not” (Mehra et al 2004:782). Do new technologies empower or exclude workers who cannot - or will not - use them? My research focuses primarily on trade unions in the developed world, and in particular the United Kingdom (UK). In these countries, Internet penetration, literacy and associated skills are high enough for it to be at least theoretically possible for a mass of workers to engage with technologically facilitated trade union activity.

However, in order to address the issue of the digital divide and provide an international comparator, I will also look at whether trade union activists in developing countries use new technologies. I have chosen South Africa as an example: because the country is Anglophone and there are existing links with trade unions in the UK, comparison is relatively easy. Also, South Africa has an advanced telecommunications infrastructure, making it technically possible for unions to use new technologies. However, Internet penetration is much lower, particularly among working class people.

### **Trade unions and social movements**

Trade unions do not exist in isolation, and are generally part of coalitions of varying degrees of strength. In countries where Social Movement Unionism (SMU) is a

dominant – but declining (Bezuidenhout 2002) - industrial relations model, such as South Africa (Hirschsohn 1998), these links are explicit. In other industrial relations models, links can be more tenuous and contested. Nonetheless, trade unions (and trade union activists) in both South Africa and the United Kingdom engage extensively with sister organisations, including political parties, social movements and community groups. How are these organisations using new technology? Are there differences between the way unions use technology, and if so, what can these organisations learn from each other? Can we collaborate with these organisations in sharing good practice, and develop an online SMU?

### **Dangers and control**

While technology, used strategically, has potential for union renewal, it clearly has serious pitfalls – including giving employers unprecedented power to monitor workers, to create and share trade union blacklists, and to vet candidates before employment commences (Lee 2008). It is also important to consider the wider context of software use and the Internet, and whether cyberspace is controlled by corporations for profit, or democratically by society. I will explore whether the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement has solutions for activists concerned about data control.

It is clear that the current demographic of trade union activists in the UK – “pale, male and stale (Ledwith and Colgan 2000:244)” – does not accurately reflect the demographic of the working population, which is younger, multi-ethnic and increasingly female. In South Africa, the typical trade union member is a Black man

who wears blue overalls to work as an operator in the manufacturing sector (Naidoo 2000), despite a growing service sector and feminisation of the workforce. Can new technologies help draw new groups of workers to unions? What happens when the iconoclasm of Internet culture meets the hierarchy of the trade union movement?

## **2. Literature review**

This dissertation looks at the potential of new technologies to revitalise trade unions. It seems useful, then, to examine why renewal is necessary, and to will begin with an overview of trade union crisis. We will examine the reasons for the crisis – including the role of Information and Communications Technology (ICTs) in causing the crisis – and look at what the literature suggests as solutions.

This dissertation addresses the issue of the digital divide by comparing the use of ICTs in the UK to South Africa, and it will be necessary to contrast and compare the industrial relations models and situation of unions in both those countries. Then we will move on to literature that deals specifically with cyberunionism, and examine it from the context provided by the renewal literature: in what ways can ICTs contribute to the renewal project? It will also be necessary to consider literature from outside the field of industrial relations. We will examine literature on the development of technology, its effects on society, and particularly its use by social movements and political organisations. It will also be necessary to consider the work of practioners, often in the form of blogs and articles in newspapers and magazines. Finally, we will consider some of the limitations of the literature, examine ways to mitigate these, and suggest areas for further research.

### **Crisis and renewal**

#### **Trade union crisis in developed countries**

It is widely accepted that trade unions are in decline, and indeed face crisis – particularly in the developed world, and including the UK. Some significant studies

include Hyman (2004), Frege and Kelly (2003), Behrens et al (2004), Munck (1999) and Phelan (2007). In fact, dry labour market statistics usually suffice to demonstrate decline: the most obvious indicator is the decline in membership seen in most industrialised countries. In the UK, for example, current union membership is 7,656,156 in 185 trade unions, down from a peak of 13.2 million in 1979 (Certification Officer 2009:23). Union density is now around 30%.

A similar pattern is evident in most OECD countries. From the early 1980s onwards, trade unions have been in crisis, losing members, collective bargaining coverage and political influence. This is due to a combination of external factors (political attack, globalisation, loss of jobs in manufacturing and changes to the mode of production), and internal factors (rigidity of union structures and an inability to adapt to changed circumstances).

For the UK and other developed countries, probably the most important external factor has been that nexus of circumstances commonly referred to as 'globalisation', and the move away from Fordist production line economies to new production methods and organisation of work. This has been facilitated by ICTs (Lommerud et al 2005), which have allowed corporations to manage global enterprises easily. The story of globalisation is well known (Bélanger 2001): new technologies allow production to be outsourced around the world, making it possible for companies to shift production to the cheapest countries, potentially facilitating a 'race to the bottom' (Chan 2003). As manufacturing declines in developed countries, these economies shift to services, and unions lose members and power in their traditional

areas of strength. (Bélanger 2001, Mason 2007). There is, of course, no uncontested definition of globalisation (Burnham 2000), and it is easy to overstate the shift to a post-Fordist, “information economy”. After all, we do not live on information, and goods need to be produced somewhere. Although Amazon is an online bookseller, it still employs people to package and post books in an environment very familiar to Fordism. How do we separate the reality of globalisation from the hype?

Munck (1999) provides a broad survey of globalisation's challenge to the labour movement: he investigates the shift to post-Fordist production, with its labour market flexibility and 'just in time' production. He finds that “tendencies have been confused with an actually achieved new mode of social regulation” (Munck 1999:10). While careful to expose much of the hype and mythology around globalisation, he finds a “huge leap” in the “internationalization of production” that “posit[s] an actual globalization” (Munck 1999:11). Munck finds that the net result of this is the decline in the manufacturing sectors in most industrialised countries. Manufacturing has been replaced by a growing service sector, with increased casualisation, outsourcing, off-shoring and subcontracting, and the growth in the use of agency labour. This has also changed the demographic base of the workforce, as workers in flexible and service sector jobs are disproportionately women, ethnic minorities, migrant workers, young people or other groups not traditionally associated with trade unions (Ledwith and Colgan 2002).

The trade union response to globalisation varies, and has ranged from rejection and

resistance to a tactical acceptance (Munck 2008). Burnham (2000) examines the debates in more depth than we have space for here. However, we can note that within the divergent responses of trade unions, there has been some recognition that it is also possible for workers – particularly in developing countries – to benefit from globalisation. In addition to the ‘race to the bottom’, a ‘climb to the top’ is possible (Mosley and Uno 2007). In the correct circumstances, we can positively effect the outcome of globalisation by embarking on global, cross border organising campaigns (Bronffebrenner 2007).

In addition to the problems posed by globalisation and its production methods, there has been an ideological attack on trade unions, led by corporate interests opposed to union resistance to these changes. The rise of neo-liberalism under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan has seen the elevation of individualism (Salamon 2000:53-58), and a decline in the belief in collective action and unions as working people's 'sword of justice' (Hyman 2004:22). The ideological hegemony of the monetarism of Chicago School economics (Klein 2007:51) since 1975 has left trade unions with no convincing alternative (Hyman 1989:175). Crucially, the belief in the ubiquity of globalisation and the ideological victory of those claiming there is no alternative to globalised capital has “paralyse[d] radical reforming national strategies,” as the judgement of the international markets is feared (Munck 1999:11).

Internally, unions are resistant to change and structurally not suited to the task of organising this new, diverse workforce (Behrens et al 2004). A number of authors (Munck 1999; Munck 2002; Ledwith and Colgan 2002; Hyman 2004; Phelan 2007:



Frege and Kelly 2003) suggest that in order to bring about a renewal and revitalisation of the labour movement, unions need to improve internal democracy and the accountability of union structures, reach out to new groups of workers – including women, young people, migrant workers and minority ethnic groups - and allow these groups to establish voices by encouraging autonomous organising. Greene and Kirton (2003) show that ICTs can facilitate this, while Cockfield (2005) argues that ICTs promote renewal by facilitating communication and participation, but only as part of an integrated renewal strategy.

Analysing British trade unions in 1984, Hyman (1989:175) identifies an ideological vacuum as being a major cause of the “sickness” of British trade unions. Hyman claims this is due to the unions’ close identification with the Labour Party, which had failed to “act as agents of even modest Keynesian social reform” (1989:175). While voters across the UK who identify themselves as working class consistently vote Labour (Gall 2005), Hyman shows that the society offered by the unions and the Labour Party - “an expensive bureaucratic state socialism” - was “inherently unattractive” to many working class people. With the exception of the NHS, the welfare state was experienced as being “inadequate, bureaucratic...grudging, patronising and eager to humiliate” (1989:178). Not having a convincing ideological alternative to the hegemony of monetarism, coupled with de-industrialisation, caused unions to lose influence among potential members.

There has been much discussion about how trade unions can arrest this decline. Early renewal strategies mirrored the growing individualism in society and focused

on the 'servicing' model, and particularly the need to recruit more members. This has fallen out of favour, and a return to an 'organising' model – aimed at increasing the participation and mobilisation of members – now has wider currency (Hogan and Greene 2003). While the tension between servicing and organising is contested (de Turbeville 2007), Fairbrother's renewal thesis (Munck 2002:190) establishes that increased membership participation, and the accountability of union structures, is essential to the success of any renewal strategy. Mobilisation theory asks what turns individuals in collective actors, and shifts the focus of industrial relations from institutions and structures towards social processes (Kelly 1998), including those mediated by technology. Hogan and Greene (2003) believe that Mobilisation theory fails to fully value union democracy, and is overly reliant on the actions of trade union leaders.

Despite a thorough investigation of the causes of decline, and a vast literature on opportunities for renewal, UK unions remain in crisis. Decline has largely been arrested, but trade union strength is still at an historic low. But is this experience of crisis universal?

### **South African trade unionism**

The picture in South Africa is mixed. Like the UK, there has been a loss of jobs in manufacturing and a growth in the service sector (Bahlangu 2003). But like many developing countries, South Africa has managed to buck the trend of trade union decline. Despite rising unemployment (Banerjee et al 2008), South Africa saw a continual growth in unionisation throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Wood

2001:figs.1&2). Union membership peaked in 1997, and has declined slightly since then (Armstrong and Steenkamp 2008). South African unions continue to wield considerable political influence, and to exert upward pressure on wages. Also, unlike the 'democratic deficit' (Cockburn 1995) and conservative inertia of trade union bureaucracies in the UK (Hyman 1989), South African unions still evidence vibrant shopfloor democracy (Wood and Dibben 2006).

This may be due to the fact that South Africa has historically embraced a very different industrial relations model to the UK, in Social Movement Unionism (SMU). South African trade unionism grew out of the anti-apartheid struggle, and has close, organic links with community groups and social movements.

“Social movement unionism' combines conventional institutionalized collective bargaining with modes of collective action typically associated with social movements.” (Hirschsohn 1998: p 634?)

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed in 1985, and adopted the Freedom Charter of the anti-apartheid liberation struggle (O'Malley 2007:241). COSATU became the economic arm of the popular struggle against apartheid, coordinated by the United Democratic Front. As O'Malley puts it,

“...the economy became the new theatre of war; business could no longer pretend to be above politics”. (2007:p242)

The ability of the unions to hold South African business hostage to the demands of the liberation movement was a significant factor in the defeat of apartheid (O'Malley 2004). Post-apartheid South Africa saw union membership grow, even as the SMU

model has been eroded by growing neo-liberal corporatism (Bramble 2003:207; Catchpowle and Cooper 2003:18).

Despite Munck's (1999) warning that we shouldn't discard traditional structures for a romanticised view of new social movements, there is evidence supporting the ability of SMU to strengthen unions in poor countries – and within marginalised communities in rich countries. Trade unions are seen as part of a much wider terrain of struggle that includes many popular organisations. This forms an organic community of activism that is able to articulate sophisticated and complex futures (De Sousa Santos and Rodriguez-Garavito 2006), and manage a complicated relationship between groups with varying but related interests. Where unions in industrialised countries often suffer from ideological poverty, SMU has a wealth of alternative strategies.

### **Cyberunionism**

I define cyberunionism as the use of new spaces created by technology for trade union activism. It is important to note here my insistence on placing cyberunionism in a *space*, rather than considering it as a set of tools. This will be explored in more depth. Since the creation of the Internet in 1994, new technology has been identified as representing an opportunity for organising in new ways. Indeed, in an early piece on the potential of ICTs to revitalise trade unions, Waterman (1992) asks whether “labour communication by computer” will bring on a “fifth international”. He explicitly links ICTs to his concept of new labour internationalism (1992; 2006).

According to Freeman, (2005:182) “unions are innovating and experimenting with the Internet at unparalleled rates”, and this is likely to “profoundly affect union membership and density”. Freeman finds that “unions are indeed in the process of morphing from the institutions of the Webbs to the institutions of the Web” (2005:163). While the potential is clearly there, to what extent has it been realised? How should labour movement activists approach new technologies? I will begin by exploring the tension between unions as organisations, and members as activists.

### **Top down strategies: an uneasy relationship**

The fact that technological change ushered in globalisation and played a major role in trade union crisis complicates union attitudes to using technologies for organising. Lommerud and Straume (2007:21) find that there are “incentives for rational Luddism” - i.e. in some instances, trade unions are correct to conclude that technological change is damaging to them. Trade unions have an historical antagonism to technological development (Mokyr 1992), due the fact that this has usually been driven by the need to improve productivity, cut costs and increase profit – although their potential to offer a life free of drudgery has long been recognised (Marx 1970). From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, new technologies have lead to job losses, deskilling, increased flexibility and the general devaluing of labour power.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the most common response of trade unions to ICT has been Luddism 2.0, particularly in the first stage of development. During

this phase, even unions which did embrace these technologies often appeared to do so without a clear strategy: unions created websites simply because it was the done thing, and there are many examples of extremely poor use of these technologies by unions. For example, Waterman (2001:21) remarks that trade union websites frequently offer nothing but a "bigger, faster, further-reaching union magazine", and are "primarily organs of propaganda".

However, there is a wide recognition that technological change is here to stay. Marc Bélanger, formerly an ILO specialist in using ICTs for union education in developing countries, reminds us that

“The technological maelstrom buffeting us as we head into the 21<sup>st</sup> century is just the edge of the storm front. There are hurricanes of technological change coming our way.” (Bélanger 2001)

We are at the cusp of an information revolution that is transforming every aspect of our existence. In order to survive, trade unions need to learn from new technologies. Ignoring ICTs is not an option (Darlington 2001).

However, there is a central contradiction at the heart of attempts by unions to embrace new technologies to enhance their power. Union leaders are well aware of the need for renewal within the movement, and particularly the need to attract more members. They are also aware of the potential offered by ICTs to provide this renewal. However, they are conscious of the possibility that these technologies could undermine their power (Greene et al 2003), and so the relationship with new technologies is uneasy at best.

A successful top down strategy has been the creation of 'join online' facilities, particularly when offered by general unions who will represent workers in any sector. This allows workers to join the union online, instantly. Sometimes the facility is advertised using online advertisements that appear when keywords such as 'disciplinary' are typed into a search engine. However, this strategy brings its own set of problems: it results in isolated members, in disparate workplaces, many of them joining the union with existing problems, who are expensive and difficult to service due to the lack of a proper representative structure in the workplace.

#### **Bottom up strategies: distributing discourse**

It is important to examine the democratising potential of ICTs and to look at the activity of activists acting on their own initiative. An important theme is Greene et al (2003) and Hogan and Greene's (2003) idea that ICTs facilitate 'distributed discourse', undermine oligarchies and facilitate union democracy. Hogan and Greene consider the case of [www.rogerlyons.com](http://www.rogerlyons.com), where a website created by a lay member of the union MSF was used to expose fraud committed by the general secretary, hold him accountable and rid the union of corruption. In this case, detailed information about the union's finances was made available to members, who had the opportunity to comment, vote in online polls or participate in other ways. This had the clear effect of undermining an oligarchy, and the presumed effect of encouraging rectitude among future leaders. Several trade union mergers down the line, the website still exists, now in the form of [www.dearunite.com](http://www.dearunite.com), where it continues to provoke the ire of trade union bureaucrats. This demonstrates the power of ICTs to hold the

leadership of the trade union movement to account, to act as a counter balance to the development of oligarchies and to facilitate transparency.

While Michels (1915; 2001) argues that the 'incompetence of the masses' precludes them from full participation in the life of an organisation, due in part to a lack of sophistication and education, Greene et al (2003:287) feel that new technologies are educational and provide an "up-skilling process", and that technologies are getting easier to master.

The idea of distributed discourse resonates well with Barbrook's (2000) "network community". He finds that individuals tend to use ICTs to engage in common projects using collective labour, and develop networked communities of practice. If Barbrook is correct, and communities coalesce around union organising, distributed discourse is likely to facilitate a dynamic online landscape of trade union activists collaborating within a horizontal network – a very different picture from traditional trade union structures. This is appropriate: Bélanger (2001) argues that ICTs facilitate decentralised networks, and that trade unions need to adapt to these in order to survive.

### **ICTs and the South African labour movement**

How does the digital divide affect cyberunionism? By looking at practice in South Africa – a country with significantly lower Internet penetration – we can get an idea. I have chosen South Africa as a comparator for two reasons: firstly, I have significant experience in working with South African trade unions, including assessing their



attitudes to technology. In 2004, I was part of a research team lead by Charley Lewis, former head of the Information Technology Unit at COSATU. We undertook a study for labour service organisation Ditsela on the feasibility of using ICTs for trade union education in South Africa (Allias et al 2004). The research included a detailed survey of the ICT capacity of South African trade unions, as well as the 'e-readiness' of senior union activists. My experience of working with Workers' World Media Productions also showed that radio – the Internet of Africa - is a useful alternative for unions.

The second reason is that South Africa has an information infrastructure that is sufficiently well developed to make cyberunionism at least technically possible: the Internet – including mobile Internet – is widely available, and mobile phone penetration is particularly high. In addition, trade union activity in South Africa is largely Anglophone and comparable to the UK due to shared history.

There is, perhaps surprisingly, a long history of the use of ICTs for union organising in South Africa. During the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s, electronic communication was used to share messages between the banned African National Congress and Communist Party, and the newly formed COSATU (Lewis 2005). This resulted in the creation of web service WorkNet, a service which continues to play a prominent role in providing ICT support for South African social movements in its later incarnation of SANGONet.

In 2000, COSATU took the innovative step of creating its own free, online email for trade union activists at [union.org.za](http://union.org.za) – my first email address was [walton@union.org.za](mailto:walton@union.org.za). However, the service was not maintained. COSATU has run some fairly effective email campaigns, notably the “Stop Biwater” campaign against water privatisation run by Anna Weekes<sup>3</sup> of municipal workers’ union SAMWU. Lewis (2005) also reports that text messaging has been used on an ad hoc basis.

Current practice by COSATU is limited to running a website – which has a comprehensive and well-used archive of material – and an email newsletter. While the design of the COSATU website (and that of its affiliates) is dated and lacks features, Lewis (2005) points out that it is sufficient for the needs of its constituents. Neither COSATU, nor any of its affiliates, have any presence at all in social media, and a blog that was created some years ago has not been maintained.<sup>4</sup> In the research conducted for Ditsela (Allais et al 2004), we discovered that most activists use computers “seldom or never” (p. 50), seldom used email, and had low levels of ICT skills. Despite this, there was a strong desire to learn more.

The biggest issue in South Africa was clearly one of access: the digital divide. We found that while Internet penetration in South Africa was much higher than most of the rest of Africa, it was still significantly lower, and much more expensive, than in developed countries. There were additional problems specific to the labour movement: access to ICTs in South Africa varied considerably according to race, urbanisation and income levels, making it impractical for most working class South Africans to gain access. Low levels of literacy, particularly in English, combined with

an oral culture, created further barriers. In addition to this was the perception that ICTs are elitist, their link to status, and the lack of adequate technical support – a common complaint during the survey was “the e-mail is down” (p.7).

Our research did find that mobile phone penetration was extremely high, and of particular interest is the potential for text messaging to revolutionise trade union communication. There are a number of case studies of effective use of text messaging by social movements in Africa. Naidoo (2010), for instance, writes of using text messaging to monitor women’s political empowerment and report domestic abuse in rural South Africa, and text messaging has also been used to monitor xenophobic violence in South Africa (Ushahidi 2008), human rights abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Waruzi 2010), and post-election violence in Kenya (Goldstein and Rotich 2010).

Most of these case studies used text message gateways such as Ushahidi and FrontlineSMS, which allow an easy interface between a server based on a computer, and mobile phones in the field. However, while mobile phones can enhance communication,

“... they cannot replace traditional forms of activism and can only act as transmitters and amplifiers.” (Kreutz 2010:27)

Our conclusion was that the South African labour movement should begin to integrate ICTs into all training, in order to develop a generation of technologically literate activists. To ignore ICTs would be to perpetuate the digital divide. However, the movement should proceed carefully, and be “wary of expensive, high-tech

interventions” (p.7). Part of the task of this dissertation will be to find out whether there has been any progress over the past six years.

### **Cyberspace as space: the ideology of the Internet**

While new technologies offer activists new *tools* to use for union activity, it is important to conceptualise cyberspace as *space*, and to understand activity taking place there as being in a new realm with its own possibilities, ethics and practice.

Waterman (2001:21) feels that most trade union use of new technology

“...represents a belated response to ICT as instrument (faster, cheaper and further reaching), not as cyberspace (another kind of space, with unlimited possibilities for international dialogue, creativity and the invention/discovery/development of new values, new attitudes and new dialogues).”

Barbrook (2000) writes extensively about the culture of cyberspace, and in a highly evocative and challenging work argues that ICTs facilitate “cyber-communism – the spectre of communism is haunting the Net” (2000:6). Barbrook argues that because cyberspace makes sharing easier than commerce, and the rewards of sharing so great, this creates an online “gift economy”, and that most people in cyberspace practice “cyber-communism” – by freely giving what they have, and taking what they want – even if they have not considered the implications of their actions. While not all commentators draw conclusions as radical as this, there is wide scale agreement (Tapscott and Williams 2007; Shirky 2008; Bollier 2008) that ICTs facilitate a culture of sharing, cooperative work and iconoclasm – a finding that is congruent with ‘distributed discourse’.

For many workers in the new information economy – Barbrook calls them ‘digital artisans’ (2000) - cyberspace is a workplace. Chaison (2005) argues that workers in this sector – who often work from remote locations - face physical isolation and psychological alienation from their colleagues and unions. Organising workers in cyberspace has been largely neglected by trade unions, although Munck (2002) and Diamond and Freeman (2002) mention the failed attempt of the French employees of video game manufacturer UbiSoft to create a virtual union for themselves in cyberspace. Freeman (2005) has several examples from the US of 'open source' union forms, largely as cyber branches of existing unions. In addition, the UNI-Global strike in online virtual reality Second Life is an interesting and innovative example that attracted a lot of attention (UNI Global 2007). Barbrook argues that ‘digital artisans’ need to resist being co-opted into the “new aristocracy” of the cyber-elite, and organise collectively: "a virtual trade union should emphasise new principles of labour organisation: artisanal, networked and global" (2000:8).

Barbrook (2000) analyses in great detail the ideological underpinning of the development of the Internet. He argues that the development of new technology has largely been a right wing project to form a “high-tech aristocracy” to reconcile economic expansion with social stasis, by forming a new elite of “venture capitalists and media stars”. This neo-liberal bias – Barbrook calls it *The Californian Ideology* (Barbrook and Cameron 1996) – has presented our post-Fordist future as a utopian information age, giving unprecedented personal freedom. While this triumphalism was damaged by the dot com crash (DeLong and Magin 2006; Freeman 2005), this is still the dominant ideology of cyberspace. Barbrook points out that this techno-

utopia “remains dominated by the hierarchies of the market and the state” (200:8), and that there is a tension between elite interests, and of ordinary users defending the Internet as a 'Digital Commons' (Bollier 2008).

Networked communities within the ‘gift economy’ produce goods of profound complexity (Barbrook 2000; Tapscott and Williams 2007; Shirky 2008; Curtis 2009). These include the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia – produced by the freely given collective labour of tens of thousands of users - and the Free and Open Source Software<sup>5</sup> (FOSS) movement. By working collectively on tasks, users have moved beyond distributed discourse into distributed *production*.

### **Distributed production, the Commons movement and FOSS**

*“The new order is predicated upon open access, decentralized participation, and cheap and easy sharing.” (Bollier 2008)*

The Commons Movement is a political, ecological and cultural movement to reclaim the Commons – the collective property of humanity – from corporate control (Klein 2001). It has intersected with the development of digital culture, and the ideological struggle to make this culture freely available to all. In 1983, information technologist and software freedom activist Richard Stallman - increasingly concerned with the effects of copyright on intellectual freedom - developed the concepts of Copyleft and the General Public Licence (GPL), which would allow users to freely alter and reuse any cultural or intellectual product, including computer software (Stallman 2007). He explained his reasons on the GNU Manifesto, which many consider to be the birth of the FOSS movement:

“In the long run, making programs free is a step toward the post-scarcity world, where nobody will have to work very hard just to make a living. People will be free to devote themselves to activities that are fun, such as programming, after spending the necessary ten hours a week on required tasks such as legislation, family counseling, robot repair, and asteroid prospecting.” (Stallman 2002:41)

FOSS has grown into a significant movement since Stallman's Manifesto, and there are now FOSS packages – developed by practitioners – for almost any task, including complete operating systems, programs for statistical analysis and so on.

According to Da Rimini (2007), software is culture. Technological development has historically been influenced by socio-economic factors, and served the interests of the elite. However, new technologies and the FOSS movement mean that technological development is no longer solely in the hands of the elite. By embracing the 'digital commons', practitioners can create value through distributed peer production. ICTs are more than just tools: they offer the potential for the development of an alternative mode of production. Corporate control of technological development has led to the increased exploitation of workers and the earth's resources; Stallman (2002) is suggesting that by decentralising technological development, it can remain within the Commons and contribute to a richer existence for all.

This idea of a Creative Commons has spread, and includes the Open Courseware movement, designed to make educational resources freely available (OCW Consortium 2009). What does this mean practically for unions? Primo (2009) argues

that there is a natural partnership between the FOSS movement, social movements and non-profit organisations. Why, then, do most trade unions still buy proprietary software from multinational companies, when a supportive community of activists is able to provide free, Copyleft software that fulfils the same requirements? Eric Lee of LabourStart, probably the most prominent practitioner of cyberunionism, argues that

“...if you really love monopoly capitalism and companies like Microsoft earning billions in profits just warms your heart, go ahead — keep using Windows. But if you like the idea of a society in which goods and services might be distributed for free (does “to each according to his need” ring a bell?), you might find the free and open source software movement of some interest. For ideological reasons, unions should be lining up behind and aggressively promoting this one sector of the modern economy in which there is a real alternative to giant, profit-driven transnational capital.” (Lee 2007)

### **Criticisms of the literature**

Part of the difficulty in undertaking research in this subject is that rapid innovation in ICTs tends to leave the academic literature behind. Much of the literature on cyberunionism (Shostok 2002; Freeman 2005; Greene et al 2003) concerns the first stage of Internet development, often referred to as Web 1.0, characterised by relatively static websites that required a fairly high degree of technical expertise to manage: for the most part, this left web strategies in the hands of trade union organisations rather than workplace activists. For example, Shostok's (2002) *The CyberUnion Handbook*, while comprehensive, consists of papers written in 2001 or earlier, and tends to deal with union strategies for using ICTs, rather than the opportunities available to activists or autonomous groups of workers, and as such misses some of the democratising and iconoclastic potential of these technologies to distribute discourse.



With a few notable exceptions such as Richards' (2008) exploration of work blogging, the implications of the explosion of the next phase of ICT development - Web 2.0 - remain largely unexplored. These technologies allow users with no particular skill to create websites and online social networks, and to rapidly share information. Crucially, the tools for this level of interaction are becoming easier to use, cheaper and more portable, as many mobile phones now have the capacity to interact with social networks like Facebook, and social news feeds like Twitter.

While the literature is yet to come to terms with Web 2.0, the next phase of ICT development – the Semantic Web, or Web 3.0 – is upon us (Lu et al 2002). Web 3.0 will embed metadata in all online content, creating seamless 'webs of data' that will be easy to interact with, and will provide trade union activists with an unprecedented amount of easily accessible, relevant and accurate information. Since employers have always relied on a disparity of information in their attempts to dominate industrial relations, the potential of this to transform the landscape is obvious. It will be some time before reliable data exists, but it would be fair to speculate that where the literature finds the potential for distributed discourse when evaluating Web 1.0, this potential will grow exponentially as technologies become more accessible with Web 3.0.

Freeman's map of existing cyber practice (2005) is very useful, but has some of the limitations of Shostok's (2002), and I disagree with his suggestion that unions should develop what he inaccurately names<sup>6</sup> 'open source' models of organising, whereby

workers from any industry are recruited, without recognition agreements and collective bargaining structures, and serviced cheaply through the Internet. While it would be interesting to measure the dynamic between a 'network community' (Barbrook 2000) and a more formal trade union structure, Freeman's example fails Blackburn's (1967) unionateness measure, and seems to defeat the purpose of trade unionism. It might appear to be a quick fix for boosting membership numbers, but the servicing model is widely considered to be a failure (Hogan and Greene 2003), and there is no substitute for building strong workplace structures. Informal online developments should augment rather than attempt to replace traditional forms of trade unionism.

#### **Does distributed discourse undermine trade union structures?**

While the opportunities created by distributed discourse are exciting, it has potential flaws: there is the danger that it could lead to dominance by the most technical proficient activists, who are likely to have disproportionate power. In practical terms, this means those working in white collar and technical jobs in the knowledge economy. Are we not, therefore, in danger of replacing one oligarchy with another, of yielding power to a cyber elite? While ICTs can undermine oligarchies, can they not also undermine democratic structures? Clearly, proactive strategies to bridge the digital divide are necessary.

Seifert and Sibley (2005) show that new technologies can have a destructive impact on workplace struggle. They feel that the unofficial 30Kfirepay website undermined the leadership during the strike of the Fire Brigades Union in 2002-2004, was

infiltrated by the security services, helped to divide the strikers and contributed to the defeat of the strike. It should be pointed out that, while ICTs have a tendency to facilitate transparency, they are not de facto more democratic. Despite the 'democratic deficit' (Cockburn 1995) that exists in unions, trade unions structures are, for the most part, at least technically legitimate: members in a workplace elect shop stewards and other activists onto branch structures, who in turn elect regional committees, a National Executive Committee and so on. While this process differs from union rule book to union rule book, for the most part leaders are freely and fairly elected. Therefore it would be quite possible for an unrepresentative group of disaffected members, with no mandate, base or constituency, to have a disproportionate effect on union decision making due to technical skill, innovative use of technology, or the use of smear campaigns. In the Roger Lyons/Dear Unite example mentioned by Hogan and Greene (2003), it is worth noting that there are established counter-hegemonic (Gramsci 1971a) forces within the union concerned, in the form of organised groups of activists campaigning for lay democracy. To what extent did this website engage with these structures? Member-led dissident websites should be viewed from this perspective.

In addition to these limitations, I believe there is an ideological critique to be made. Many writers on cyberunionism, including Freeman (2005) and contributors to *The CyberUnion Handbook* (Shostok 2002), have an enthusiasm for ICTs is reminiscent of spontaneity theory (Gramsci 1971b): these technologies are so revolutionary – they seem to say – that merely placing them in the hands of workers will result in a renewed trade union movement. Workers will 'spontaneously' take action if they are

empowered to do so, and the task of activists is to facilitate their communication with each other by promoting ICTs. While I do not believe we can know everything and anticipate every eventuality, my view is that a belief in spontaneity betrays a failure to adequately analyse cause and effect. As Gramsci puts it, “In the 'most spontaneous' movement it is simply the case that the elements of 'conscious leadership' cannot be checked, have left no reliable document” (Gramsci 1971b).

Chaison (2002) is also highly critical of the enthusiasm of Shostok (2002) and others, pointing to the alienating effect of technology. In my view, he is overly pessimistic and fails to grasp the potential of ICTs to create networked communities. Another critique is that writers (Shostok 2002; Freeman 2005; Greene et al 2003) tend to view technology as a set of tools that can be employed productively (or otherwise) by unions, with little critique of how those products came to be and whose interests they serve. It is important to defend the Internet as a civic space, as a global Commons. The examination of issues of ownership and control of the Internet, of the Commons movement, and of FOSS is inadequate. Clearly this is something that needs to be explored, but outside of practitioner blogs, it appears to have gone largely unnoticed.

Finally, much of the literature appears to be written by people with only a theoretical understanding of cyberspace. I believe that participant observation needs to be used to a much greater extent to properly explore the subjective experience of using new technologies to organise.

## **Conclusion**

Several key ideas emerge from the literature that form the context for this research. The first is the idea that trade unions are in crisis, and need to develop renewal strategies. In order to do so, they need to confront the realities of globalisation by fostering a New Labour Internationalism (Waterman 2006), and solve the problem of ideological poverty and disconnection from society by embracing a Social Movement Unionism. They need to reach out to new groups of workers, and revitalise union structures by distributing discourse and facilitating the horizontal and pluralist networking of activists. ICTS offer the potential to facilitate all of the above and this must be explored further. Finally, it is necessary to understand the ideological context that technology exists in, and to defend and contribute to the Digital Commons and FOSS movements.

### **3. Positionality, epistemology, methodology, and ethics**

#### **Positionality**

As Lofland et al (2006) observe, personal experience often plays an important role in the decision to research a topic, and in the approach taken. This is certainly the case with my decision to research the role of new technologies in renewing the trade union movement. Because I am conscious of the way subjectivity can affect the integrity of research (Ratner 2002), I believe the best way to guard against this is to dispassionately examine my positionality in some detail so that I can correct for bias.

#### **My attitude to technology**

I am an enthusiastic user of new technology, including the Internet, FOSS and Internet-enabled 'smart phones'. I have personally found ICTs to be empowering, and my experience is that technology has enhanced my capacity as an activist. This is particularly the case with FOSS, which has placed powerful tools in my hands. I believe that this movement can be classified as a social movement to free information from corporate control, and that these aims are congruous with those of the trade union movement.

I first went online in 1999, and LabourStart was one of the first websites I visited. I have been following the activities of trade unions online for more than a decade, and so my opinions on technology are hardly dispassionate and unbiased. However, I am aware of the digital divide and also of the fact that many people simply are not comfortable using new technology and that my enthusiasm is not shared by

everyone. I wish to conduct research into the utility of new technology, and develop findings that will be of practical use to the labour movement.

I have endeavoured to remain conscious of my bias at all times and restrain myself from overstating the importance of technology – specifically by noting the digital divide, and paying special attention to reported barriers to the use of new technology.

### **My union**

I am very much an engaged researcher, and I have approached my research as a practitioner and activist, rather than as a dispassionate observer. I have endeavoured to discover tools that are useful, and to share these tools with other trade union activists. I have done this both within my own union, and with the wider trade union movement through my website [cyberunions.org](http://cyberunions.org).

I am employed by the trade union Unite, and I have used both formal and informal networks that I have access to through this position. Some of the people I have interviewed or asked to complete questionnaires are Unite members, activists or employees. While my research is not officially endorsed by the union, or carried out at their request, I have used my contacts within the union to access information. This means that personal relationships, as well as my perceived status within the union, are likely to have affected the responses I received.

However, my research is being conducted unofficially, and I am under no obligation to share my completed work with the union. I have made it clear to participants that the research is independent and that I will ensure confidentiality. In addition, I

specifically did not ask close colleagues to participate, as I felt it was important to maintain some critical distance.

As I believe it is important to share good practice, where appropriate I will make recommendations to the union based on my findings. I will make the same recommendations to the wider labour movement if invited to do so.

Also, I am aware that the trade union movement has a number of serious structural impediments and flaws that prevent it from adequately responding to members' needs: these include a lack of democracy, overly rigid and unresponsive structures, a lack of adequate representation for women, Black and Minority Ethnic and other marginalised groups, and so on (Hyman 1989; Ledwith and Colgan 2002). Unite is not exempt from these faults, and has the additional difficulty of being in the process of a contested merger between Amicus and the Transport and General Workers' Union, which I feel has caused a lack of focus. Despite this, I believe that Unite's project to create a global super union is brave and far sighted. My hope is that my research will contribute to making this project a success. In my view, trade unions come under enough attack in the press and from anti-union employers; my role is to constructively and critically engage, helping to develop and highlight good practice and opportunities for renewal and revitalisation. As a result, my research will only focus on the shortcomings of the movement in so far as they are directly relevant to the research questions.

I also believe, with George Orwell (1946), that language is political. According to Edelman (1977: 57), language is used to



"...establish superior and subordinate roles, to make it clear who gives orders and who takes them, and to justify in advance the inhibitions placed upon the subordinate class."

This is true in academic writing as well as in the political arena and the medical field Edelman is referring to: language is used to exclude the 'uneducated' from positions of power. Because I want my work to be useful to the trade union movement, I have endeavoured to keep the language as simple and accessible as possible; the words I use should illuminate rather than obscure.

### **Political context**

It is important to understand ICTs within the context of developing technologies and globalisation. As discussed in the literature review, there are different views within the labour movement on globalisation. I believe that it is possible to 'globalise resistance', and to respond creatively to the challenges it poses. With Munck (2008) and Bronfenbrenner (2007), I take the position that it would be counter-productive - not to mention impossible - to attempt to stop globalisation. We can, however, influence how it unfolds.

I believe that the tools of business – and ICTs are very much a tool of business (Waterman 1992; Barbrook 2000) - can be used by the labour movement, and as well as globalising production we can globalise justice, union organising and good practice. To do so we need to critically embrace new technologies and use them strategically.

I believe that the hegemony of corporate globalisation - what Fisher (2009) calls 'Capitalist Realism' - is dangerous for the planet and bad for its inhabitants. Trade unions, in my view, are part of a loose coalition that forms a global resistance movement, made up of actors affected negatively by corporate globalisation. Trade unions need to adopt more pluralist approaches to organising, and strengthen their ties with this coalition, which specifically includes social movements and the 'multitude' that Hardt and Negri refer to (2001). Therefore I have an interest in promoting a model of industrial relations – SMU – that accords with these ideals. Part of the task of trade unions is to assist with the democratic redistribution of the control of resources.

My political views are also informed by a number of writers loosely affiliated to the Marxist tradition, including Hardt and Negri (2001), Žižek (2009), Holloway (2005), DeLeuze and Guattari (2004), Badiou (2005), Klein (2007), Fisher (2009), Wright (2002) and others. I find their views challenging – particularly with regard to their critique of trade unions (Hardt and Negri 2001; Wright 2002) – but nonetheless useful in attempting to adequately describe political economy and culture. In particular, I find Žižek (2009) and Badiou (2005) useful in developing a critique of the post-modernism that dominates discourse.

A central theme addressed by a number of these writers (Hardt and Negri 2001; Holloway 2005) is the lack of a revolutionary subject in post-Fordist economies. In the modernist, Fordist economies of the 20th century, the industrial working class, organised into trade unions (and Labour parties), was seen by most of the Left as the

natural agent of social change (Holloway 2005: p162). However, the neoliberal backlash lead by Reagan and Thatcher decimated the industrial base and fragmented the working class. Social Democratic parties around the world – including Labour in the UK, and the ANC in South Africa – have broadly accepted this changed world view and are no longer fighting for fundamental change – hence Labour’s abandonment of Clause Four and the commitment to a redistribution of wealth (Heffernan 2003). Žižek (2009) asserts that the working class is divided: immigrant versus indigenous, old versus young, women against men, skilled against unskilled, manufacturing against servicing, rich world versus poor.

I am, therefore, interested in the extent to which the levelling and unifying effects of new technology can facilitate the birth of a new revolutionary subject, or at the very least a group of workers willing to act in global solidarity to defend their interests. These broader philosophical questions are, of course, beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I have introduced them as they do inform some of my thinking.

I am also influenced by Green ideas around subsidiarity, the idea that decisions should be taken at the lowest practical level (Colburn 2008). I believe that this ties in well with the renewal literature about the importance of autonomous organising (Ledwith 2006) and giving people as much direct control over their lives as possible: for me, trade unionism is about democratising the world of work, and through that the political economy and wider society.

## **Epistemology**

Where does knowledge come from? How do we know what we think we know? How do we identify what we don't know? How does an approach to a theory of knowledge affect the validity of research? The experience of researching and writing this dissertation has caused me to fundamentally question my approach to knowledge, and to develop some frameworks to base my enquiries on.

Arnhart (1985: 194), writing on the limitations of language, asserts that

"Strictly speaking, we cannot even distinguish between language that is literal and realistic and language that is metaphorical and mythical. All language depends on metaphor and myth, because in language we simplify the complex by viewing the unfamiliar through its likeness to the familiar."

In attempting to research and communicate ideas for this dissertation, I am confronted by this limitation. According to Wittgenstein (1958), language has no essential meaning, but remains a series of language games. Where does this leave the researcher?

The obvious response is to attempt to avoid this trap by sticking to a rigid positivism. But Mannheim, in his seminal work on the subjectivity of all scientific enquiry, warns that

"It is impossible to conceive of absolute truth existing independently of the values and position of the subject and unrelated to the social context."  
(Mannheim 1936: 70-71)

Mannheim's paradox, according to Arnhart (1985: 189) is that if "all thought is ideological then how can the scientific study of ideology be free from ideological bias?" In critiquing Edelman's shift from positivism to "radical relativism", he warns

of the risk of collapsing into incoherence, and the need to identify a structure and theory for knowledge.

"...all political thinking is mythical in that it depends on fictional images determined by the arbitrary values of the observer. Social science, therefore, cannot be 'value-free'." (Arnhart 1985: 195)

This creates a dialectical tension between rigid positivism and inchoate meaninglessness. Epistemology is contested; there is no agreement among social scientists about where knowledge comes from (Bryman 2001). There is, however, significant literature on the shortcomings of different approaches. For social science research to have value and meaning, it is necessary to find a dynamic synthesis in this contested terrain. While meaning will always subtly shift due to the essential subjectivity of human experience, I believe there is solid ground. Instead of identifying a single structure and theory, I have attempted to mitigate some of these shortcomings by choosing a methodology that as far as possible uses different research methods, and approaches my questions from different angles. I accept the epistemological challenges outlined above; nonetheless I believe that careful research, and an awareness of these issues, can produce interesting and useful results. Despite the alleged ideological bias, inherent meaninglessness and amorphous nature of language, It is possible to add to the sum of human knowledge by building on a body of existing work, and to communicate with clarity ideas which are of use to humanity.

## **Methodology**

I work full time as a trade union official, and conduct my research in my free time in the evenings and weekends. This puts limitations on my capacity to conduct serious

research. It was not feasible for me to conduct an extensive interviewing process or to collate and analyse qualitative data from a number of trade unions: a comprehensive study of the effect of new technologies on union renewal was not practical. It was also probably not necessary: in my view, it has been possible to get reliable results through the tactical and strategic use of different methodologies.

To begin with, I used what I found in my environment, collecting data on the use of new technologies – initially indiscriminately - using grounded theory to build up a picture, test ideas and deduce theory from the evidence. My role as a trade union official positioned me as part of a network of activists, and a primary research ‘laboratory’ was the Unite Scottish organising team, who tested many of the tools I suggested. It seemed appropriate to use this resource and focus on conducting research within my network. Once I had a body of data, I undertook a second, more focused reading of the literature, and attempted to examine some of my findings in the light of the hypotheses that were beginning to emerge.

This provided broad theoretical questions which needed to be tested. However, due to the limitations in the literature identified earlier, it was not possible to ground my approach confidently in theory derived from the literature and to develop a hypothesis from it. I have taken a largely inductive approach, and my development of theory has been an iterative process, based on testing early impressions against the subjective experience of research participants. The literature allowed me to develop some tentative hypotheses – particularly around distributed discourse, new labour internationalism, and the SMU. However, I felt that attempting to develop and test a

theory based on these ideas was beyond the scope of this research, and instead I have used them as a theoretical backdrop for a wide-ranging enquiry rooted largely in the subjective experience of activists.

### **Ethics**

I am aware that there are important ethical considerations when conducting research. Of primary concern is that my research is of benefit to society, and does no harm. In addition, since I have extensively used trade union networks, and relied on the good will of activists, it is important that my work strengthens the union movement and provides useful tools for activists. It is very important that being involved in research does not expose any of the participants to negative consequences, particularly if they are in a vulnerable position.

I have addressed these ethical concerns, firstly, by being up front with all concerned about the nature of my research. I have made it clear that while it is being conducted for a Masters dissertation, and not on behalf of a trade union or any other organisation, I will endeavour to publish my results as widely as possible, and I will endeavour to make my research available through my website. For this reason, I have offered anonymity to all participants.

## 4. Research methods

### 1. Use of new technology

One of my criticisms of the literature (Chapter 2) is that there is insufficient participant observation as a methodology. Too many writers on cyberunionism have addressed the issue from a purely theoretical viewpoint, and demonstrate little subjective understanding of the experience of being a cyber activist. This has often led them to see cyberspace as a set of tools, rather than a distinct space.

My primary research method has been to situate myself firmly within cyberspace as a participant observer, to engage in 'distributed discourse', and try to become part of a network community. I did this, firstly, by creating accounts at the union social networking site Unionbook, and social news service Twitter. I already had an account at Facebook. On these services, I specifically identified myself as a union activist conducting research, and interacted with other activists.

I used FOSS in all aspects of research. I tested a number of Linux and FreeBSD operating systems, including Ubuntu, Debian, Trisquel, Sabayon, PCBSD, antiX and Fedora, before settling on Mint Helena KDE Edition<sup>7</sup>. I used Opera and Firefox to browse the Internet, and Wordpress to create the <http://cyberunions.org> website. I used Open Office, Lyx and KWord as word processors, Inkscape for graphic design, and Scribus to lay out and set the final document. All software was downloaded free of charge from the Internet, and comes without copyright or other restrictions.



I created the <http://cyberunions.org> to publicise my research and to engage with activists. I wrote articles based on my research findings, and publicised them through social media. In keeping with the 'gift economy' notion identified by Barbrook (2000), everything on the website has a Creative Commons license, meaning activists are free to download, reuse and alter any content that I create. I also read a number of blogs by active trade union activists. Of particular use was trade union blog aggregator Tigmoos.co.uk.

### **Potential weaknesses and mitigating actions**

The greatest potential weakness with this methodology is bias, which I addressed in Chapter 4. A further weakness is that I am limited by my knowledge and technical skill, as well as by compatibility issues between FOSS and the software used by my supervisor. This was more difficult to mitigate, as I had to balance the need to learn how to use the technologies with the need to research them.

## **2. Survey**

I created an online survey using Survey Monkey<sup>8</sup>, to find out from activists what tools they were using, and what their views on the potentials of cyberunionism were. The survey asked a combination of closed and open questions, and is presented in Appendix 1. I publicised my survey by email, on my website, through Twitter,



Figure 1. Screenshot of a message posted to the Union 2.0 group on Facebook

Unionbook and on Facebook. I chose this distribution method because I wanted to test the quality of the network I had created. How widely would the survey be distributed if I publicised it through social media? Would activists take the survey, and pass it on to colleagues? Which method would be most effective for gathering responses?

As a Unite member of staff, I have relatively easy access to large databases of contact details. It would have been quite feasible for me to send out an email with the survey link to large numbers of activists, or to ask colleagues to help me get respondents. I specifically did not choose this route as I wanted some critical distance, and relied

primarily on social media. However, I did email the survey to a group of fifty Unite Union Learning Reps (ULRs). My intention was to use them as a control group, and compare their responses with those of the open group.

### **Potential weaknesses and mitigating actions**

Rather than using official channels to distribute the survey, I used my own networks, raising the issue of bias. The open nature of the survey means a traditional measure of sample size is almost impossible (with the exception of the ULRs I emailed). However, I was aiming particularly at qualitative data, and also at testing the extent and effectiveness of my network. I was disappointed in the number of responses, as I expected social media to facilitate wider distribution. I believe I would have been more effective if I had spent more time building up a network and online community of practice before attempting to conduct research.

I explicitly attempted to get survey results from the UK and South Africa, but left the survey open for respondents anywhere in the world. Most survey respondents were from the UK, and about 80% were members of Unite. This clearly indicates the bias caused by my own engagement, and cannot claim to accurately represent the views of trade unionists generally. Despite this, I believe it provides useful qualitative data and important indicators which will be discussed below. I also believe that the methodology is entirely congruent with my desire to use grounded theory for my research. I started my research in my immediate environment, and allowed myself to be lead by my initial findings to expand my circle of enquiry.

I did not carry out a paper-based survey. I am aware that this limits my respondents to those who are comfortable using new technologies, but this is appropriate as this is the population I wanted to reach: my intention was to ask cyber activists in my network what their views on union use of new technology was. The feelings of those who are not comfortable with new technologies is a separate issue.

### 3. Interviews with key practioners

I intended to hold structured interviews with key practioners that I had identified, and I established contact with them, and obtained permission to conduct interviews. I contacted them when I reached the point in my research when I felt their input was needed. However, I found it more helpful to have ongoing conversations with them, by email, as ideas and issues occurred to me. They very graciously responded to my queries, and the assistance I received was crucial in helping me to focus my research. They gave me many crucial leads, helped to distribute my survey, and introduced me to important new material.

Probably the most important practioner of cyberunionism is Eric Lee of LabourStart. Because Lee has more than ten years direct experience in running an international website dedicated to trade union issues, I have taken his views on issues relating to union use of ICTs very seriously. In addition to reading much of what Lee has written, I have been in contact with him throughout of the research process, as well as with his Canadian colleague Derek Blackadder. I have been in contact with members of the TUC Organising Team, including new media specialist John Wood, with Donnacha DeLong, vice president of the NUJ, who works as a consultant for unions and social

movements on the use of new media, and with Neil Scott of Second Life Left Unity. In South Africa, I have been in contact with Charley Lewis, the primary expert on the use of ICTs by South African unions, as well as Anna Majavu (née Weekes), formerly communications officer at SAMWU and a number of other South African trade union activists. I have also been in contact with Peter Waterman, who has written substantially on South African unions, and wrote an important early paper on the links between international labour solidarity and ICTs (Waterman 1992).

### **Potential weaknesses and mitigating actions**

My approach to interviewing and coding means that there is a tendency for the data to be anecdotal. I mitigated this by considering it carefully in light of the literature review and my own experience. Also, most of the practitioners have written extensively on the issues, either in blogs or academic articles. In many instances when I asked questions I was simply referred to articles they had written, which provided the information I needed.

### **4. Action research**

I share an office with the Unite Organising Department in Scotland, and we have a history of helping each other with campaigns. Early on in my research project, I began sharing the tools I was discovering. This relationship has grown, and with their consent and full cooperation, I used the organising team as a 'laboratory' for cyberunion tools. I interviewed a Unite seconded organiser working in the finance sector, an organising team leader working in the food and voluntary sectors, and the senior regional organiser.

### **Potential weaknesses and mitigating actions**

Personal relationships can affect the integrity of the data. This is addressed in Chapter 4.

### **Limitations of this research**

As outlined in Chapter 2, rapid changes make research particularly challenging. This is an exciting and dynamic field, but unless I am able to draw out universal principles, my research could be redundant almost as soon as it is complete. I chose this topic in March 2009, and the field has moved on dramatically since then. In March, Twitter was a little known and obscure microblogging platform. However, during the contested elections in Iran in June 2009, Twitter proved a vital communication link to opposition supporters claiming electoral fraud, whose views are available to anyone following the '#iranelection' tag. This is the first time in history that breaking news has been 'crowdsourced' (Wired 2006), and this has been widely reported in the media. This is likely to inspire trade union activists to do the same.



Figure 2. Cartoon by Ian Marsden demonstrating the use of Twitter during the Iran Election

In addition to this, the financial crisis and budget cuts means that the whole field of industrial relations is more volatile than it has been for a generation. My research will be a document of a particular set of historic circumstances – rapid technological advancement combined with workers in vulnerable positions and increased trade union militancy – and it will be challenging to draw conclusions that are universally applicable.

## **5. Presentation of data**

A brief discussion is given below on the results of each of my research methods. I also considered the results of a survey carried out by LabourStart in October 2009 (LabourStart 2009) into Twitter use by trade union activists. As the raw data was made available, I aggregated it into the results of my own survey where appropriate.

### **Research method 1: Use of new technology**

I found this method to be extremely useful as it gave me a qualitative understanding of cyberunionism. It also gave me the opportunity to test tools, and discern their usefulness. I found the website I created to be a very useful way of engaging with activists and practitioners, and some of the most insightful responses I got were comments posted on the site. I was surprised by some of the results: social media yielded fewer responses than I expected, and I also found Twitter to be a much more dynamic and interesting technology than anticipated.

### **Twitter**

At first the utility of Twitter was not apparent to me: my first 'tweets' consisted of messages like "I don't understand how Twitter works", and "what's the point of this?" However, over time I learned how to use it. I found it to be an interesting and innovative communications medium, and ideal for radically distributed discourse. Twitter allows users to post short messages, of up to 140 characters, and to 'follow' other users to read what they post. As one Twitter user I interacted with noted,





Figure 3. Tweet from @khayadlanga

Twitter has a well-defined mark-up language and the ability to embed metadata using “hashtags”. For example 'RT' means 'retweet', or 'forward', 'D' is 'Direct Message', '@' followed by a username identifies a user, and '#' turns a term in a hashtag, or searchable metadata. By using these conventions it is possible to hold dynamic conversations. Embedding hyperlinks to webpages - using URL shortening services to comply with the 140 character limit - means it is possible to communicate rather more than the 140 character limit would suggest. Making effective use of hashtags was particularly important. For instance, searching the '#unions' tag, it becomes possible to read, in real time and in an instant, what union activists around the world are saying about their activism.

Over the course of the research, I observed how hashtags were used to aggregate information and to mobilise. For instance, when the Vestas wind turbine factory on the Isle of Wight was closed in summer 2009 it was occupied by workers, whose

supporters used the '#vestas' tag to share information and to raise awareness. The result was that thousands of people - mostly environmental activists - travelled to the Isle of Wight to show solidarity with the workers in what appeared to be a spontaneous outbreak of SMU. Gregor Gall argued in The Guardian (Gall 2009) that there is a need for trade unions to build alliances with environmental groups to protect jobs that benefit society.

Kwak et al (2009), researchers based at the Computer Science Department at KAIST in Korea, analysed 41 million Twitter profiles and concluded that while Twitter is often characterised as a social networking site, it has many of the characteristics of a news medium. Its primary purpose is to share news and information, and, unlike social networks like Facebook, most users who interact on Twitter do not know each other. The social bookmarking site Delicious follows uses the same metadata convention to allow users to share links to interesting online content. I used the hashtag 'MAILTUS' to save and share articles that were valuable to my research. The links are available at <http://delicious.com/Leischa/MAILTUS>, and are also imported into my Facebook page and website at <http://cyberunions.org> using RSS<sup>9</sup>.

### **Trending topics**

The ten most used hashtags at any one time become 'trending topics', displayed on Twitter's front page. While these are often dominated by celebrities and media gossip, social movement campaigners have consciously tried to create trending topics. When the legal firm Carter-Ruck took out a super-injunction against The Guardian to prevent it reporting on the dumping of toxic waste by oil company

Trafigura, social movement activists publicised it on Twitter, and it quickly became a trending topic, undermining the company's attempts to silence the issue (The Guardian 2009).



Figure 4. An image showing “Trafigura, “Carter-Ruck”, “Gagging”, “banned”, “dumping” and “toxic” trending on Twitter on 13 October 2009 (The Guardian 2009)

## Crowdsourcing

One very interesting use of Twitter is in ‘crowdsourcing’ (Wired 2006) solutions to problems. This involves, simply, asking for solutions, and using appropriate hashtags. For instance, as an experiment I built a social networking site for CCISUA<sup>10</sup> (the United Nations Staff Unions), and posted a message asking for advice on what software to use. I got a number of responses, and decided to use Ning as a result. In May 2010, I was invited to speak on *Trade Unions, Web 2.0 and Social Media* (presentation included on accompanying digital media) at the General Assembly of CCISUA in The Hague, and demonstrated this effect live. I wrote a message on Twitter explaining what I was doing, and asking people to respond with their favourite thing

about Twitter. Within 10 minutes, I had 35 responses, with people saying what they liked Twitter because it's easy to use from a mobile phone, it provides a wider range of information more quickly than any news source, and it is interesting, quirky and human. Twitter's strength is its simplicity. My experience of using it, however, was more positive than that of most union activists I interacted with:

"I've been 'tweeting' for several months now, purely as an experiment to see how beneficial Twitter could be for our movement.

As a barometer of political opinion, Twitter is superb. As a political campaigning tool, it is awesome.

But unions are different. Our strength comes from workplace organisation, and I still don't really get how Twitter is going to be a major part of that."

Comment on my website, (Cyberunions 2010a)

### **Social networking: Facebook, Unionbook, Ning and Linked In**

#### **Facebook**

Facebook is the most widely used social networking website in the world, with 400 million active users (Facebook 2010). I found Facebook relatively useful for my research – 15% of the survey respondents came from Facebook. I joined a number of trade union related groups, and engaged in several debates, with mixed results: most trade union forums were not very active. The fact that it's easy to use, and to share information, makes Facebook useful, but I really disliked the sense of not being able to control the data, and also the fact that it is easy to become distracted.

#### **Unionbook**

Unionbook is a project of LabourStart. It is a social networking site for trade unionists – a union alternative to Facebook, started as a direct response to problems

encountered on Facebook. It is run on FOSS Elgg software, and unlike Facebook, respects privacy and welcomes trade unions. It has many of the same features of other social networking sites: the ability to post and share content, to create groups and so on. At the time of writing, it had fewer than 4,000 members – a fraction compared to Facebook. However, I had a number of very useful interactions with Unionbook members, and was able to use it to publicise and discuss my research. Forums were more active than those on Facebook, perhaps signifying that users take it more seriously as an activist resource. I also made use of two other social networks, Linked In and Ning. However, neither added new information that is worth examining.

### **Second Life**

Second Life is a virtual reality world accessed through the Internet. Participants create 'avatars' – online figures that can interact with other characters – and enter a world that in some ways mirrors real life. It is possible to hold meetings or events in Second Life in real time, with your avatar interacting with others. The environment is much like that of a computer game. Second Life reached the attention of trade unionists when the global union federation UNI staged a protest against IBM in Second Life in September 2007 (UNI Global 2008). Two thousand avatars took part in a demonstration outside IBM headquarters in Second Life, wearing union T-shirts and carrying (virtual) placards.

There was wider activity on Second Life in the form of Union Island, where the TUC, Unison and several other organisations had a presence. This did have a purpose:

Second Life is increasingly used as a workplace for telecommuters, so a union presence was useful to deal with issues specific to workers here. However, in



Figure 5. Screenshot from the IBM Second Life protest

January 2010 the decision was taken to close Union Island due to it not being used sufficiently (Union Island 2010).

I found Second Life time consuming, with high barriers to entry: installing software, learning the environment, a high speed Internet connection and computer with a good graphics card. There was little perceivable benefit for the kind of activism I am involved in. The concept of Second Life has potential – for instance, for distance learning, or for union conferences – but I found it to be of little practical use to most trade unionists at this time. It is also worth noting that Second Life is not a neutral space – it is owned by US Internet company Linden Lab, and therefore has the

problems associated with other corporate-controlled places. I wrote about this on my website, and attracted the following comment:

“I agree that SL is useless as a place for Unions to use as a hub. SL Union Island was a great idea, but with limited resources and without people who could be there 24 hours, or at the very least, ensure a once weekly meeting took place, its use fell away after the initial launch events.” - Neil Scott, Second Life Left Unity, (Cyberunions 2010 b)

### **Smart phones**

A smart phone is an Internet-enabled phone, allowing users to access a wide range of features, including social networking sites, Internet and email. Common examples include BlackBerry, iPhone and Android (which is FOSS). Shortly after beginning my research, I became aware that my ability to research social media would be enhanced if I had constant access to the Internet. I got an Android phone on a contract with an unlimited data package, meaning I could access Internet-based applications without incurring additional charges. The phone I use is able to connect to the Internet through WiFi or 3G, transfer files using Bluetooth, take pictures and video, scan barcodes, and use GPS. It has a number of associated apps, downloadable from a 'market', that use these technical capabilities for a variety of purposes. I found that the phone enhanced my ability to engage in distributed discourse, as constant Internet access meant I was able to quickly respond to messages and share information.

### **Participation in campaigns**

I took part in LabourStart urgent action campaigns, for instance by writing to Apple computers to protest about working conditions and the high suicide rate at the

Foxconn factory in China that makes iPads and other hardware for the company (LabourStart 2010a; Bloomberg 2010).

### **Training**

I attended a TUC course– called “Lights, Camera, Action!” – training activists in using video cameras and editing software, and uploading videos to YouTube (unionlearn 2010). This activity is supported by the TUC 60 Second ad contest to create trade union videos (Stronger Unions 2009), as well as by the Labour Video of the Year competition. (LabourStart 2010b). I found it useful and will join fellow participants in joining a trade union film makers network. In addition, I provided training on new technologies to Unite organisers on several occasions, as well as to CCISUA.

### **Research method 2: Survey**

175 trade union activists completed the survey. 115 were based in the UK. The second largest group – 35 respondents – were from Canada. This is due to Derek Blackadder responding to a message I posted on Unionbook and forwarding the survey to his contacts. Other respondents were from South Africa, Kenya, the USA, Australia, Ireland, The Netherlands, Germany and Malaysia. Despite specifically asking South Africans to take the survey, the response rate was low from that country.

### **An overview of survey responses**

An overview of the survey responses is given below. I have only included the responses to the questions I felt were crucial to the research. Full survey results are



available on my website at <http://cyberunions.org/survey/>, and raw data is included in spreadsheet format on the digital media that accompanies this dissertation.

### Union membership

80% of respondents were from Unite. Others in the UK included PCS, Unison, RCN, CWU, EIS, UCU, GMB, BECTU, Equity, NUJ and UCATT. Most Canadian responses were from CUPE. Other unions represented by survey respondents included the CWU in South Africa, the Inland Boatmans Union, SEIU, AFSCME, Ver.di and several other banking, health and media unions.

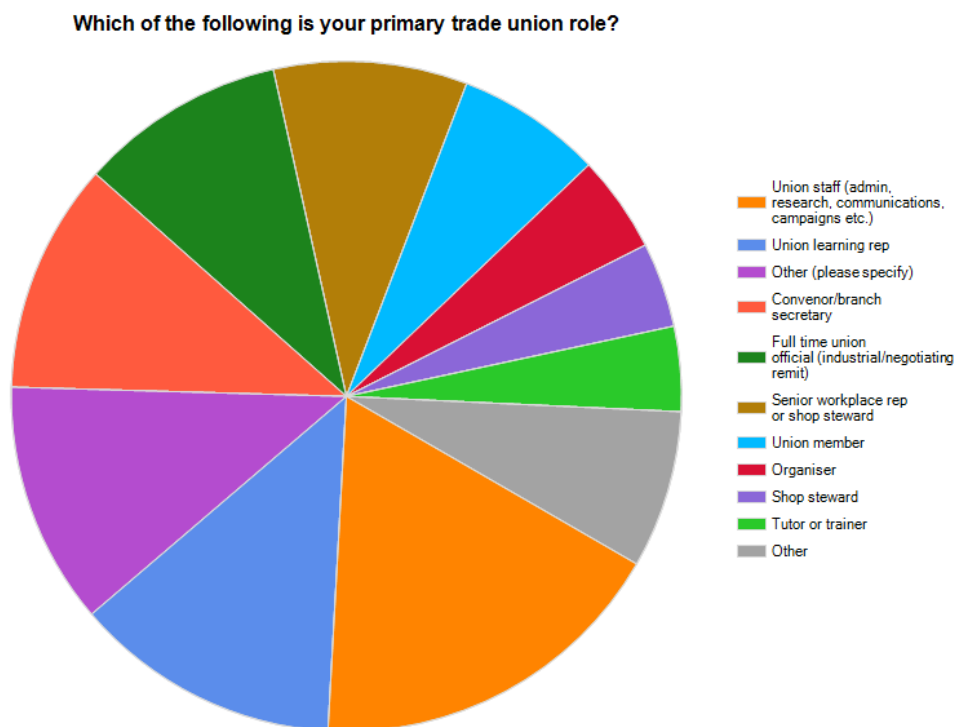


Figure 6. "Which of the following is your primary trade union role?"

## Industrial sector and job role

While there was bias towards white collar jobs, the Manufacturing sector was well represented, with as many respondents (14%) as 'Other Service activities' and 'Education'. Although 42% of respondents categorised themselves as 'professionals', with fairly large numbers reporting associate professional, managerial or admin roles, 24% reported working in a manual role.

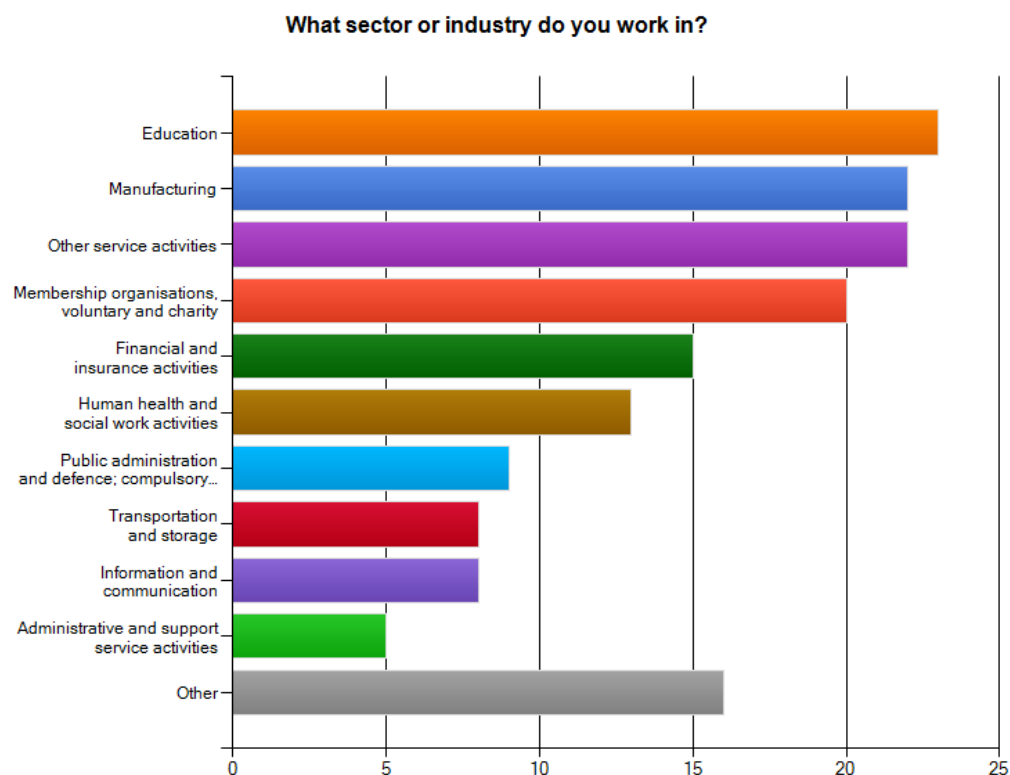


Figure 7. "What sector or industry do you work in?"

Because there is a question about whether the digital divide is determined by job role, I coded respondents into 'white collar' and 'blue collar'. There was little indication that blue collar respondents used ICTs differently from white collar ones.

## Age

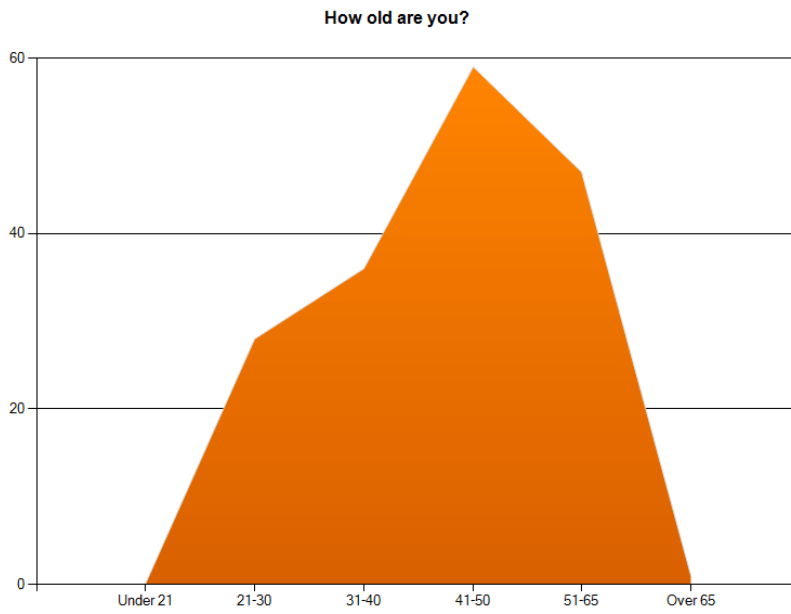


Figure 8. "How old are you?"

## Gender

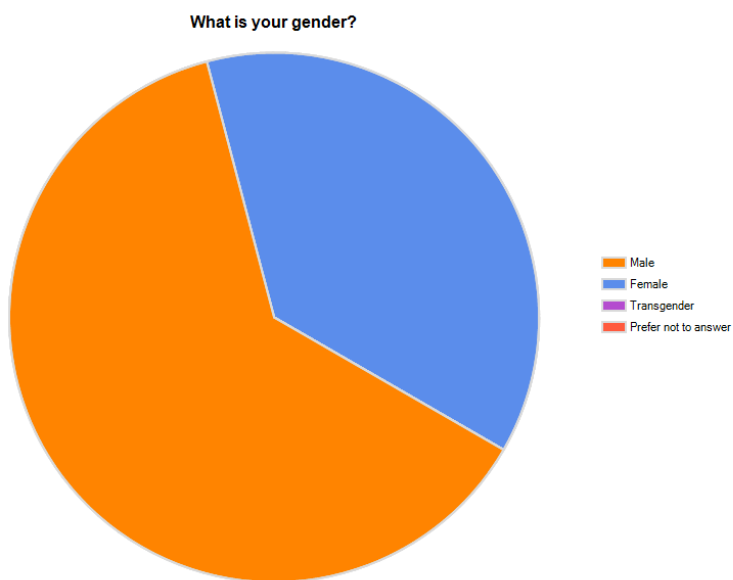


Figure 9. "What is your gender?"

## Distribution methods

Despite my use of social media, 63% of survey results came from emailed requests. In addition to the group of ULRs that I emailed, three people saw the survey on social media (Facebook and Unionbook), contacted me and offered to distribute the survey by email to contacts of theirs.

The second biggest response was from Facebook with 15%. Other distribution methods, including Twitter (6%) and Unionbook (3%), yielded even smaller returns.

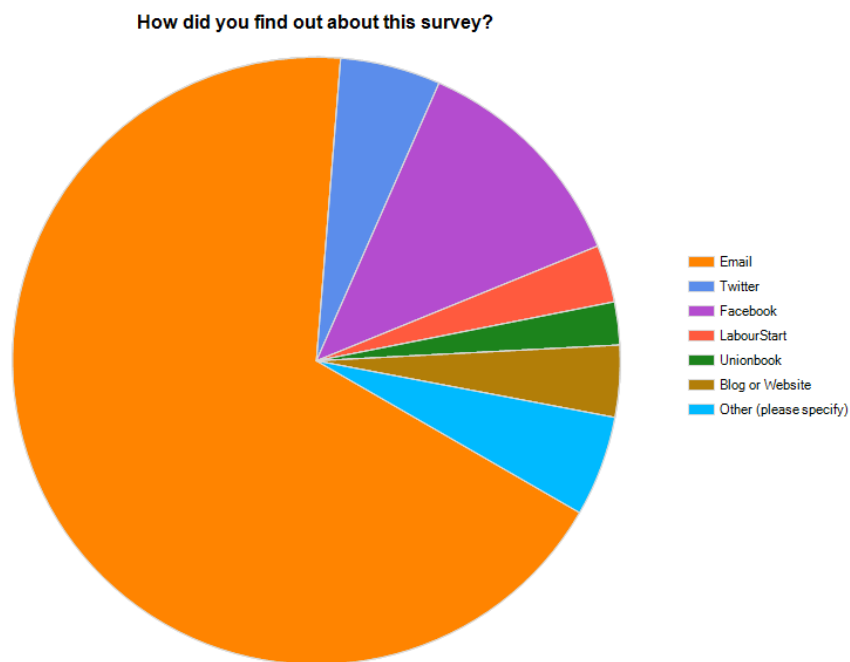


Figure 10. "How did you find out about this survey?"

## Attitudes to trade union use of electronic tools and barriers to participation

Almost all respondents reported that their trade union had a website, while only 37% reported their branches had one. Most reported that they visited the union website fairly often, with 75% visiting the site several times a month or more. Very few

respondents thought their union website was ‘very good or ‘terrible’ – most reported they found it ‘OK’. In the comments field, many responded that the design of their union website was poor and outdated, that there was often a lack of up to date, relevant information, and that their views on what they needed from the website were not considered. Some Unite respondents reported that the sheer size of the union meant the website was complex to navigate.

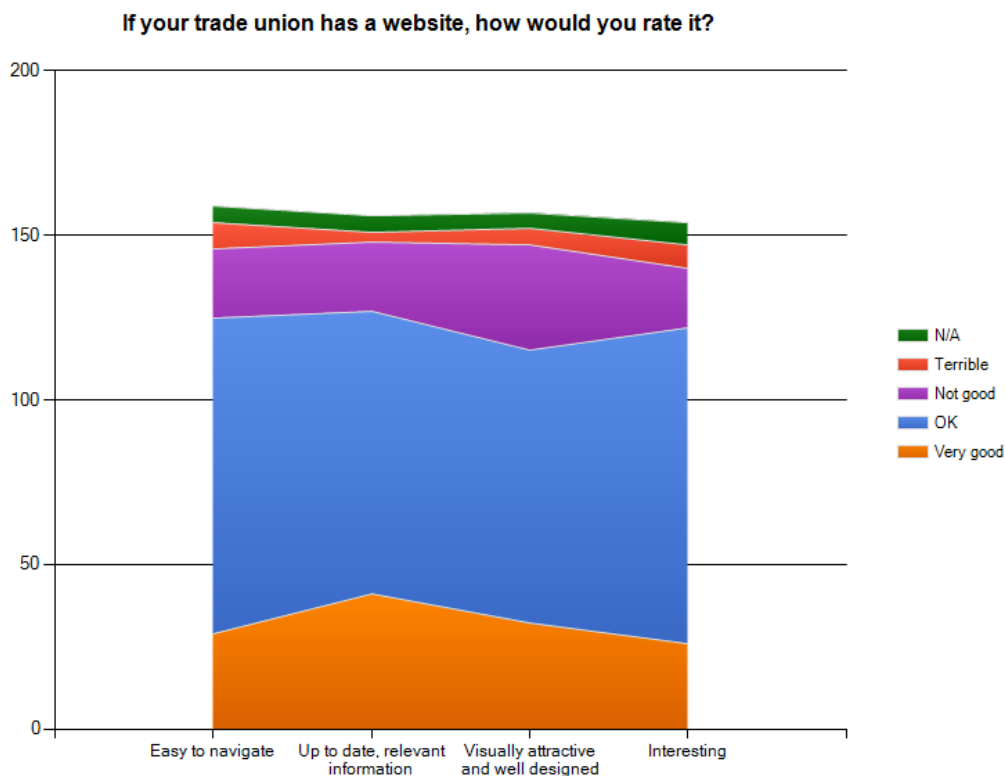


Figure 11. “If your trade union has a website, how would you rate it?”

Most respondents reported that their union used a variety of tools for electronic communication and organising. The tools that most respondents thought were essential were a website and email lists. Many other technologies were seen as useful but not essential, including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, podcasts, text messages and online forums. Most respondents thought a presence in Second Life was useless.

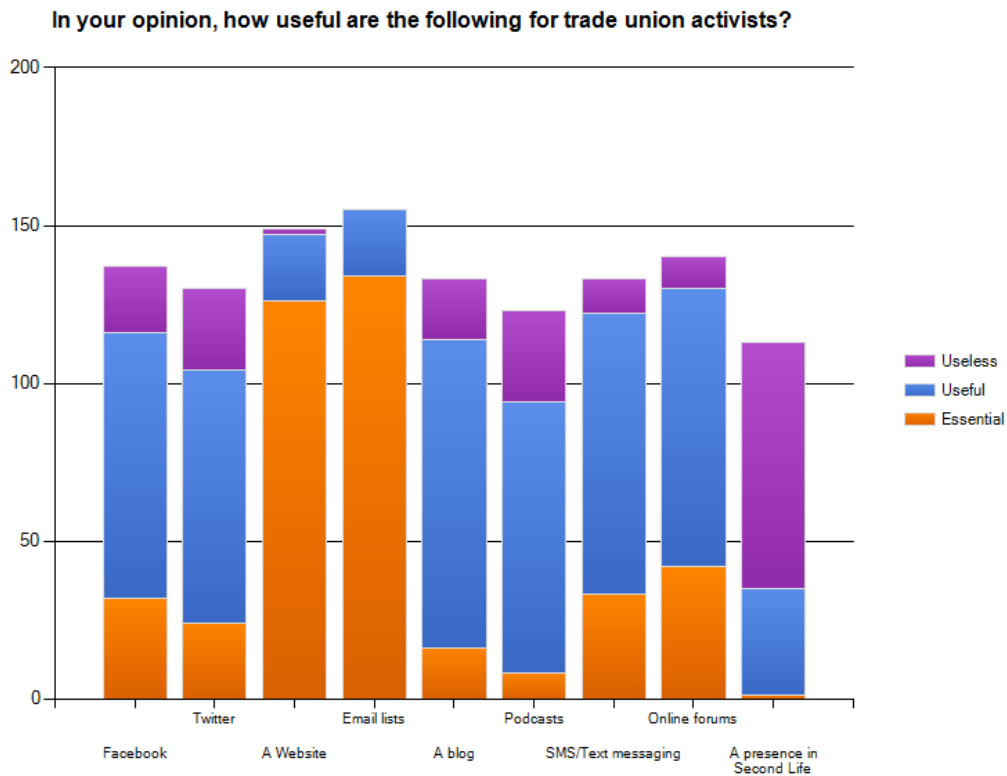


Figure 12. “In your opinion, how useful are the following for trade union activists?”

Respondents were asked about their use of technology and tools. Most reported intermediate to expert use, particularly with regard to using PCs, smart phones, email, the Internet and text messages. Use of blogs, web conferencing software and feed readers was much lower. 86% of respondents reported that they were primarily self-taught, with some also learning IT skills at work, in education or from friends. 12% reported attending union-organised training courses. Most used email for trade union work, with significantly fewer people using Facebook and Twitter. Some reported using online forums and Virtual Learning Environments.

More than half of respondents reported that there were no barriers to them making effective use of ICTs – even those respondents who only used email. About a quarter reported that they lack the time or expertise to use technology more effectively. More than half of respondents thought that new technologies would ‘definitely’ or ‘probably’ help organise workers in new sectors, help with the equalities agenda and give a voice to the marginalised. More than 80% agreed that new technologies would help organise young workers. Respondents were less sanguine about the possibilities for renewal, but were not particularly concerned about their privacy, being tracked by employers or about union structures being undermined.

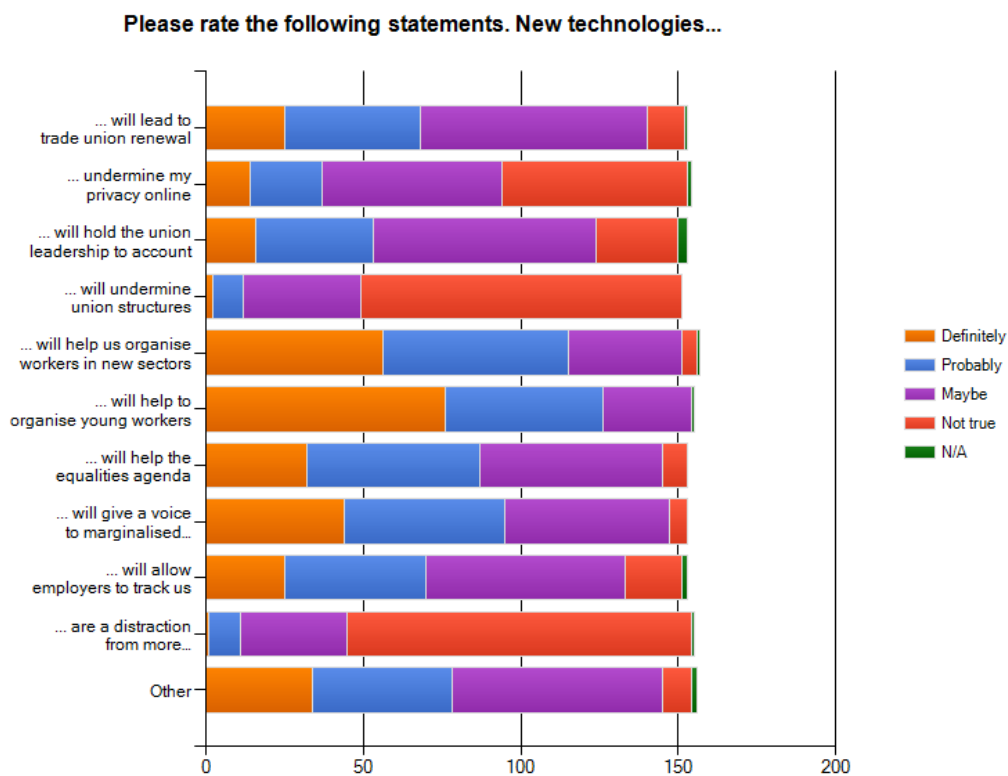


Figure 13. “Please rate the following statements. New technologies...”

## Twitter

Most respondents to my survey answered 'no' or 'I don't know' to questions about their union's use of Twitter. This includes respondents from Unite, which has multiple Twitter accounts for different campaigns, and whose joint general secretary Derek Simpson has featured in the media for his use of the technology during the BA dispute (The Guardian, 24 May 2010). Only about 12% of respondents were aware of any Twitter hashtags. This accords quite closely with the response to the LabourStart Twitter survey, carried out in October 2009 (LabourStart 2009). 1,534 people responded to the survey, and 834 left detailed comments. I coded these comments, and found most of them fell into the following three broad categories:

1. "I use Twitter and find it useful for trade union work."
2. "I don't know much about Twitter or how it works, but trade unions need to be innovative and use whatever tools are available".
3. "Twitter is faddish rubbish and trade unions should stay away from it".

About half the comments fell into one of the first two categories (although 31% of respondents used Twitter, very few used it regularly and many admitted to not really understanding it), and another half fell into the strongly anti-technology group. The sentiment against Twitter was common even among trade unionists who used Facebook. There were some extremely negative reactions to Twitter:

"Do whatever you like, but don't expect me to waste my life following Twitter or any other nonsense. What's wrong with print publication, websites, mail and e-mail. Isn't that enough???"

"I have no idea what Twitter is, nor do I have any real desire to learn more."



“Do NOT give management the opportunity to believe that the union agrees with tracking personnel in this manner. BACK OFF STAND OFF AND OTHERWISE DO NOT GIVE MANAGEMENT ANY OTHER MEANS TO KEEP US TRACKED. Have I made myself clear enough?????????????”

Despite this, a number of respondents held positive views on Twitter:

“Twitter is fast becoming a communication asset for organizing. Plain and simple, it’s fast and informative.”

“It’s a modern and important form of communication if the union movement want to attract new and young members, therefore it must embrace modern technology. This may be an opportune time for unions who don’t already offer computer classes to do so thus engaging with, and value adding to that membership.”

### **Operating systems and software**

Windows XP was the most widely used operating system, with 90% of activists reporting familiarity. Other versions of Windows – Vista and Windows 7 – were also well known, and Apple Mac OS slightly less so. 14% of respondents reported experience using the FOSS Linux operating systems. Most respondents replied that the software they used did not make a difference, as long as it was accessible to everyone and easy to use. A few respondents commented specifically on FOSS:

“Yes, Open Source software is more in keeping with core trade union principals of collectivism.” – *White collar man, Unite staff, 51-65*

“Yes. At work we use Microsoft heavily, but outside work I rely mostly on free software for web sites etc. I am frustrated that the movement hasn't produced a suite of software built from the main Open Source tools (e.g. Drupal, Joomla) and mailing list software so that we can all use something consistent and coherent.” *White collar male, senior Unite rep, UK, 31-40*

One respondent addressed both the strengths and weaknesses of Microsoft, which is widely used:

“Microsoft is easy to use and easier to share but very expensive and a target for viruses, spyware, etc – *Blue collar male, Unite learning rep, 51-65*”

The next questions tested awareness of FOSS and the Creative Commons movement. Awareness of FOSS was fairly high at 44% (a further 18% had heard of it, but were not sure what it was). Awareness of Creative Commons was lower, at 25%. A question about how important these are for unions reflected this awareness quite well: most respondents answered, quite honestly, that they did not know. Those who had answered in the previous questions that they were familiar with FOSS and Creative Commons generally answered that these were either ‘desirable’ or ‘essential’. Very few answered that it was ‘irrelevant’.

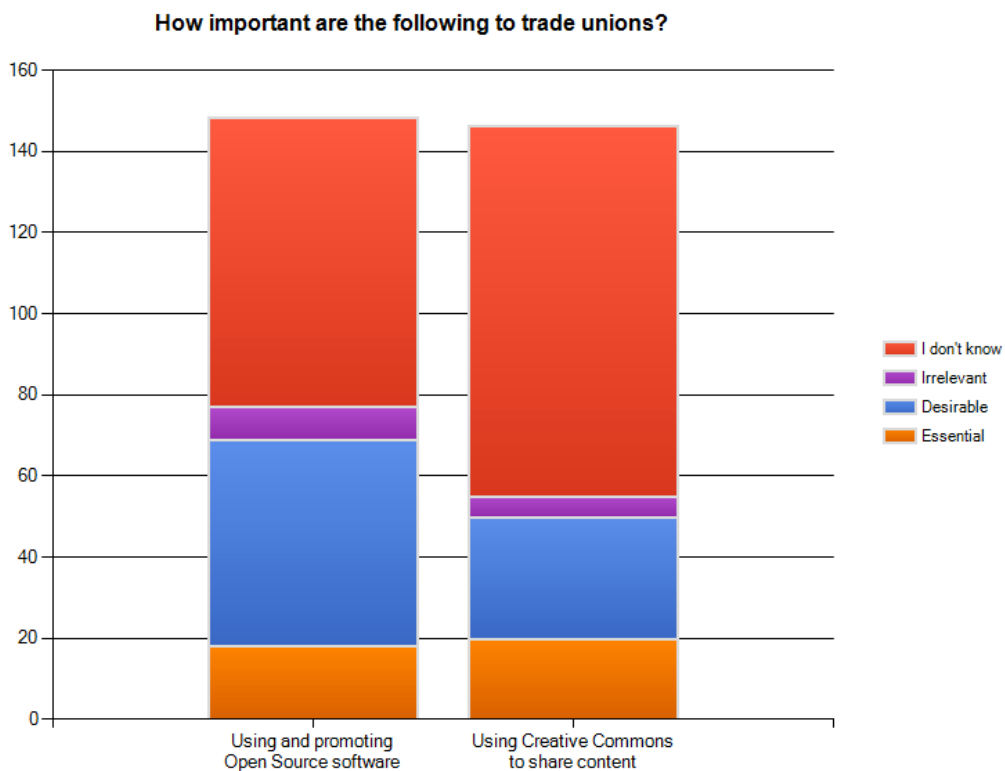


Figure 14. “How important are the following for trade union?”

Thirty respondents left detailed comments about their views on FOSS, almost all of them positive.

“Trade unions have the resources and the expertise to produce a range of activist tools that can be key to the whole social justice movement, and that can massively reduce the costs of in-house development for each union. Not only are open-source models of collaboration and development more in line with trade union values, they also make firm fiscal sense for us as a movement”. – *White collar man, CUPE staff, Canada. 31 – 40*

“Open Source Software follows the spirit of solidarity and cooperation, Creative Commons is essential so that other activists can make use of resources”. – *White collar male, UNISON rep, UK, 21-30*

“Unions should develop their own technology/software/intellectual property and not be dependent on capitalist technology.” *White collar male, CWU official, South Africa, 31-40*

A handful of respondents said that they found Open Source tools difficult to use, did not have the time to use them, or that they found the users elitist:

“I like to think I know a bit about computers, but am too often put off Open Source by the ... 'I'm better than you' attitude displayed by people who evangelise about Open Source. Perhaps I should get some better friends ;)” – *White collar male, Unite organiser, 31-40*

Several expressed a desire to find out more:

“You opened my awareness to several new concepts and approaches which I will explore diligently. Thank you”. – *White collar male, CUPE staff, Canada*

“Just worried that I don't know about it. And that there could be all these easy to use opportunities that I am missing out.” – *White collar woman, CWU member/Labour Service Organisation staff, South Africa*

### **Trade unions and online campaigns**

The survey results showed that just over half had taken part in a LabourStart Action Alert (i.e. by writing a message in support of unions in dispute). However, 25% reported they had never taken part, and 20% that they did not know what it was.

One South African respondent reported being a beneficiary of a campaign. Most felt that online campaigns were fairly effective, but that the effectiveness was context specific and lessened by the fact that campaigns of this nature are becoming widespread, leading to activists feeling 'bombarded'.

"Somewhat effective. I am bombarded by labour and social justice emails at the moment, which lessens the effectiveness of these campaigns. I have to decide which are the most important and thus worth my time." – *White collar women, CUPE rep, Canada, 31-40*

Also, as companies become used to the tactic, it appears to lose its power. The consensus seemed to be that while effectiveness could be limited, it was still a very worthwhile tool due to the fact that it is easy to use and not time consuming.

The survey results showed a fairly low level of engagement with video among activists: while 10% had created and uploaded a trade union video to YouTube, 49% had never even watched one. Those who had watched trade union videos reported that quality varied, and that low production values were a problem:

"Very mixed. Some of them are terrible - mostly due to being painfully boring on account of trying to mimic the News. Others are very good, mostly ones that have an entertaining way to put across a point." *Unemployed male, Unite activist, UK, 21-30*

Only a tiny percentage – between 5% and 6% - reported that it was 'definitely true' that the labour movement in general, and their union in particular, was 'innovative' in its use of technology. Almost all respondents agreed that unions should make wider use of technology, and very few agree with the statement "trade unions should stop wasting time online and go back to workplace organising".

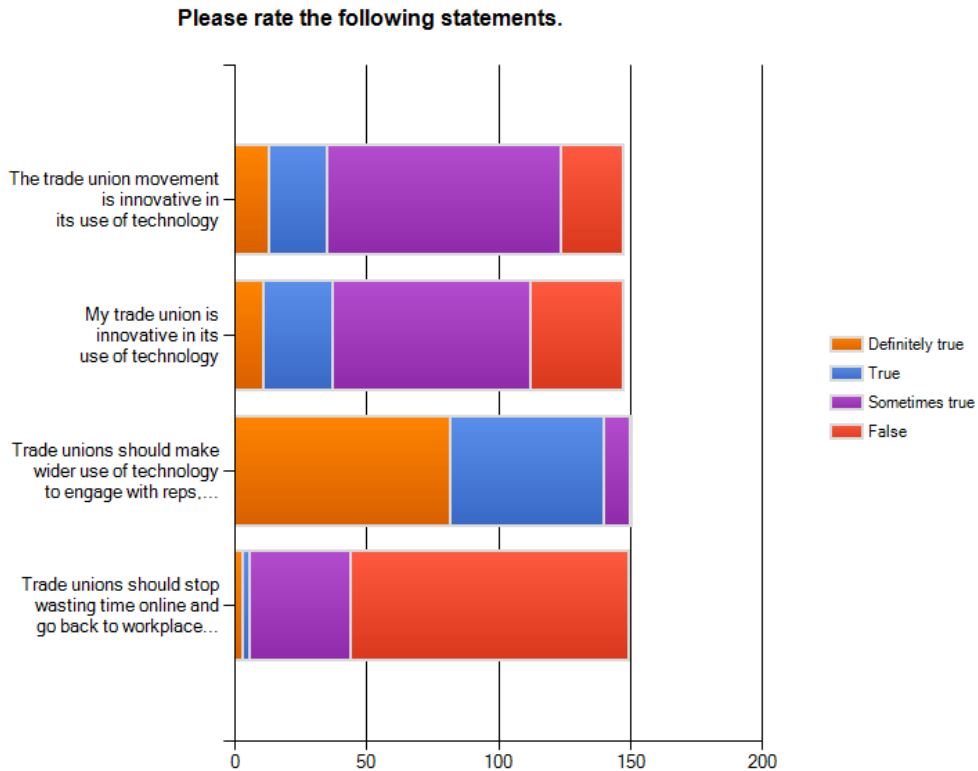


Figure 15. “Please rate the following statements”

Respondents indicated a desire to learn to make better use of technology for union activism. Asked “If your trade union offered any of the following training courses for activists, would you be interested in attending?”, more than half responded affirmatively to courses on *Web 2.0 and Social Media for union activists*, *Setting up and maintaining a branch website*, *Creating union newsletters and publications*, and *Using FOSS for union work*. There was also a high level of interest in courses on *Using Online Surveys*, and *Creating Union Films*. One respondent commented that

“What you don't know, you don't know. I think a course on all the technologies available and how to use them in organising and campaigning would be useful as a simple introductory course.” *White collar woman, Unite officer, UK, 31-40*

### **Research method 3: Contact with key practioners**

My contact with key practioners was useful for ensuring that my understanding of the issues was grounded in the experience of those who had been active for some time. Charley Lewis (Pers. Corr. 29 April 2010) provided me with a wealth of relevant literature, and was able to confirm that there has been little development in the use of ICT by South African unions since the research we conducted in 2004 (Allais et al 2004). Labour activist Mandy Moussouris (also an author of Allais et al 2004) used Facebook and video to publicise work with grassroots agricultural union CSAAWU<sup>11</sup>, attempting to build international solidarity by exploring affiliation to the IWW<sup>12</sup> (Pers. Corr 28 June 2010). There were also attempts to use FrontlineSMS as a communications tool. Anna Majavu shared her experience of using ICTs for campaigns while working with SAMWU. During this period, she started Daily News, initially a fax, and later email, round up other labour news stories in South Africa. Lewis (2005) reports that South African unionists found this really useful.

“Daily News is just a cut and paste of articles from the mainstream media. I started it only to track SAMWU's media coverage and to keep the shopstewards all over the country aware of how much media coverage SAMWU was getting. Initially I sent it out on a fax dial to about 280 workplaces, and just emailed it to the few people in SAMWU who had email. After a while I started copying it to the SALB<sup>13</sup> and Pat Craven and others and then more union officials signed up. Today, I am not sure of its usefulness, because much of the time it seems to be a Cosatu propaganda tool only.....

“It is also no longer an exhaustive search of labour news but often includes articles that favour Cosatu's faction of the ANC - the SACP - instead of Julius Malema, for example, not to mention too much coverage of Zuma.

“Actually I think the greatest success in terms of ICT - although it is not ICT at all technically - was setting up the fax list of SAMWU shopstewards. It took a lot of time and effort to collect the info because there was no national database nor branch databases. The membership section had a list of payroll administrators' numbers at the municipality and so we had to fax requests to them and get the

shopstewards fax numbers. Most of the shopstewards used to take the info and put it on noticeboards.” (Anna Majavu, Personal Correspondence, 19 June 2010)

Majavu also spoke about the use of text messages to communicate during a national strike:

“During the 2002 national strike, we took it a step further by collecting cell numbers of all shopstewards and any workers... I actually think this was the best thing in terms of organising, because the workers got very inspired and also angered when they received SMS's. For example, workers in George took the nightsoil buckets and poured them out at the mayor's office and just minutes later, after other workers heard about this on SMS, there were copycat actions. Also when workers were arrested and jailed, and three workers killed as I remember, the rest of the country would become militantly angry about this and this would keep up morale during the strike.” (Anna Majavu, Personal Correspondence, 19 June 2010)

Derek Blackadder (Pers. Corr. 1 June 2010) and Eric Lee (Pers. Corr. 26 May 2010) helped to publicise my research and distribute my survey, as well as providing valuable advice and insight. Lee in particular was able to confirm many of the ideas I had developed, as well as strongly supporting FOSS and urging caution when using Facebook: in a talk given to Ruskin students, he said “Twitter I don't get, but Facebook is dangerous!” (Lee 2010). He went on to explain the implications of the lack of privacy settings, which allow employers to search Facebook for potential “troublemakers”, as well as reminding listeners that Facebook is a private company whose motive is profit. Peter Waterman (Pers. Corr. 1 June 2010) provided me with a tremendous amount of literature and some insights into trade union perspectives on the early days of the Internet, while James Richards of Heriot-Watt University gave me with a starting point (Pers. Corr. 9 Sept 2009).

#### **Research method 4: Case study - Unite the union Scottish organisers**

*“In organising we need to be a wee bit off the wall because it works.” Finance sector seconded rep, Female, 31-40*

There are a number of different organising models within the trade union movement. The Unite model sees organising as a specialist function that is ‘strategic, sectoral and global’, and was inspired by the ‘Justice for Janitors’ campaign of the SEIU (Simms and Holgate 2010; Graham 2007). Unite’s organising department in Scotland consists of eight full time staff, and a number of reps who are seconded for a period to work on specific campaigns. At the time this research was conducted, the organising department was engaged in three major organising campaigns: in the finance sector, the food sector and the community care sector. The finance sector campaign focused on organising the newly-formed Lloyds Banking Group (formed out of the merger of Lloyds TSB, Halifax Bank of Scotland and Scottish Widows in the wake of the banking crisis). The food sector campaign focused on organising in food preparation and agriculture in Scotland, and had a major focus on the migrant workers who make up a lot of this sector. The community care campaign focused on organising workers in small organisations and charities, including housing associations and care organisations. The campaigns aim to

*“...rebuild the shop stewards movement within the sector, then combine this so shop stewards come together... we run a campaign across the sector to push up pay and conditions” Senior Organiser, female, 31-40*

I provided the organisers with training in using online surveys in summer 2009, and training in social media in early 2010. In my view, the intervention was a very fruitful



one: the organisers grasped the potential early on and were quickly making creative use of new technologies. A particularly interesting intervention was the use of electronic surveys in campaigns, especially in the finance sector. The organisers used electronic surveys to identify workplace issues that were “widely felt, deeply felt and winnable.” The survey was distributed in innovative ways, for instance by asking building security guards to email the link to the entire building. The surveys also asked if respondents were interested in getting involved, and a number of new activists were recruited in this way.

In trying to organise greenfield sites, a recurring problem was the difficulty in getting access to workers and presenting the union’s case. The organisers overcame this problem by creating Facebook groups dedicated to organising in particular workplaces. They used Facebook’s search function to find employees of that company and invited them to join the group and to invite their colleagues:

“We used it as a tool to map the workplaces, so we could find out who was pally with who, and also we could get a secret group set up where people are friendly, using that interface, if they were comfortable using Facebook, instead of setting up a union domain they were unfamiliar with. Their friends were on it, it was friendly, and it was an in to talking to people. We could pass messages on Facebook, set up discussion groups and create events.” *Organising team leader, male 31-40*

Facebook has attracted a tremendous amount of criticism due to its privacy settings, which by default publicly expose large amounts of information about users (Observer 2010). This created the danger that the employer would be able to access the group, identify the trade union activists and discipline them, possibly for breach of corporate IT policy, or for bringing the company into disrepute. To prevent this, the organisers very carefully created secret groups that did not mention the company:

“The group is anonymous, private and secret. One of the reps is a bit techy. We created a private Facebook group, and put the survey links on there... Maybe we made it too private, which limits its effectiveness. We also used event invitations... It's all quite young staff. They've all got Facebook pages, Twitter and so on... We ask if anyone wants to be involved on the campaign then we contact them direct.” *Finance sector seconded rep, Female, 31-40*

The senior organiser expressed no fear at the democratising potential of new technologies:

“That’s the sort of problem we’d like to have... if the workers start challenging the union... we’ve built a force to be reckoned with...

“We’re all committed to an ideology that’s about a trade union that’s run on an organising model, where workers are the people in control... We’re willing to be less cautious or traditional in our methods... there should be no rules or barriers to how we go about achieving that. *Senior Organiser, female, 31-40*

She also commented that there were benefits to horizontal networks, and more fluid structures:

“We’re saying to workers, ‘there’s a template, here’s logos, make your own newsletter, put what you like out’... We can’t control that, people can copy a Unite logo from just about anywhere... In some ways it’s got us off the hook because the technology is so freely available we can literally say we didn’t give permission... There is a benefit to unions in horizontal structures. The reps are doing things that we would never get away with as full time officers.” *Senior Organiser, female, 31-40*

She added that training in using new technology for campaigns should be a vital part of the trade union curriculum.

Audio files of the above interviews are included in the digital media that accompanies this dissertation.

## 6. Analysis, argument and discussion

### Trade unions are behind the curve

My experience of trade union use of new technologies suggests that many of them believe they are being innovative. In fact, they are late adopters, and are considerably behind not just business and media, but social movements and political organisations. Unions are behind the curve, and frequently fail to grasp the cultural and political implications of new technologies. The iconoclasm of Internet culture is at odds with the centralised control of many trade union structures. As the survey shows, most activists do not believe that their trade unions are innovative in their use of technology.

“What's shocking is the labour movement thinks online organizing is "innovative" rather than an old use of existing technologies. People buy things online every day, why not join a union online?” *White collar male, BC Nurses Union staff, Canada, 41-50*

“Senior officials at my union get their e-mails printed off by a secretary so that they can read them. That tells you all you need to know.” *LabourStart twitter survey respondent*

This is probably due, to some extent, to Lommerund and Straume's (2007) “rational Luddism”, as well as to the conservatism of union structures. Unions need to be a lot more innovative – and invest more resources – if they want to utilise the potential of new technologies.

### Distributed discourse and fluid and horizontal structures

Participating in distributed discourse was dynamic and rewarding, and Twitter (used in conjunction with my website) was the most effective vehicle for this. However, it

soon became clear that discourse is not distributed evenly: it tends to move through people who act as hubs, due to their relatively high profile. In many instances, this is due to them already being prominent activists. This idea was reinforced by the survey: despite attempting to distribute it using social media, two thirds of responses were due to emails sent by four people. As Derek Blackadder commented, “email is the killer app for trade unions.” It took me a year to gain 700 ‘followers’ on Twitter, while Derek Simpson, Unite Joint General Secretary, gained 1,500 overnight during the BA dispute. Clearly, having a higher profile in the union accords disproportionate power in social media too. It is for precisely this reason that trade union leaders should not fear the democratising effect of new technology: rather than undermining them, it gives an opportunity to present their case directly to members and the general public, as well as to gain a real time barometer of public opinion. The approach taken by the Unite organising team is the correct one: they were able to demonstrate that giving activists the autonomy to act is a powerful mobiliser.

While distributed discourse is possible in Facebook, I found the level of corporate control and lack of privacy sinister. For distributed discourse to be effective, people need to feel safe, and to understand the limitations of the environment. Because there is little anonymity on Facebook, it is not an ideal environment. Unionbook, as a tool created specifically for the union movement, is ideally situated to address this. It is important that trade union activists fully grasp the privacy implications of using ICTs. ICTs facilitate open conversation; they are not good at private messages.

The strong negative sentiment towards Twitter expressed by many respondents – particularly to the LabourStart survey - is interesting, especially since many did not demonstrate a clear understanding of the technology, or how it is used by trade unions. Further research into this attitude would be useful: is it formed by personal experience, frustration at being ‘left behind’ by technological developments, or by the extremely negative coverage social media receives in sections of the mainstream press? The Daily Mail, for instance, reports that “Twitter can make you immoral” (Daily Mail 2009). The survey response demonstrates that there is a group of trade union activists who refuse to engage with Twitter under any circumstances, possibly due to preconceived negative experiences. Others are open to experimentation, but are not sure where to start. A third group has used Twitter: some of this group remain unconvinced by its utility, while a small minority of active users have found it very useful. This demonstrates that it has not yet reached the critical mass required to be of true value to trade unionists. Clearly the benefits of using services like Twitter are not immediately apparent; those who have found it useful have spent time learning how to use it and engaged in the collective project of building networked communities.

It is worth pointing out that many of the most strategies do not confine themselves to the boundary of union-as-organisation: the most active cyberunionists are organisationally promiscuous and much of their activity is designed to bring together activists from different unions, as well as social movements and wider society – discourse is distributed beyond the confines of the union.

### **Uprising in China and crisis as laboratory**

There are some early indications of interesting new cyberunion strategies from an unexpected quarter: China is often referred to as the 'workshop of the world' (Story 2005), producing much of the goods consumed by the rest of the world, including most of the West's premium brands. Mason (2007) argues that Chinese workers will need to reinvent a model of trade unionism appropriate for their circumstances. At the time of writing, there seems to be an unprecedented wave of industrial action sweeping China (Financial Times 2010a). Most pertinent to this dissertation is the case of the Foxconn manufacturing hub in Shenzhen, China, which employs 300,000 workers. Foxconn produces much of the hardware we have been discussing: computers, touch screens and smart phones, including Apple's iPhones and iPads. Foxconn has been rocked by crisis due to the high suicide rate of workers (Financial Times 2010b), and there are reports (Bloomberg 2010) of a new generation of Chinese labour activists using the technology they create to organise industrially.

### **Digital Divide**

The response to the survey from South African trade unionists was low, despite the fact that I made a special effort to distribute it, through email, Facebook and Unionbook. This is clearly an indication of the effect of the digital divide. For many South African trade unionists, engaging with online content is not a familiar or comfortable experience. Within the UK, it is easy to assume that new technology is primarily used by young workers in white collar jobs. However, the reality is not as simple. While young respondents (under 30) did show a greater incidence of using and valuing social media such as Facebook and Twitter, their responses were not

significantly different from those of older activists. This accords quite well with data about Internet use in the general population: in the UK, there are significantly different levels of access between people under the age of 25 and those over 65, but in the age range that most survey participants fall into, although Internet use declines with age, the differences are not significant (Office of National Statistics 2009). There is a bias in the survey towards white collar workers, but perhaps not as big as might be expected. Thorough analysis also showed that some of the most active users were in the manufacturing sector, while many white collar workers had integrated ICTs into their union work more casually.

“I think the point about disenfranchisement of the non tech-savvy is a real issue. I’d agree that unions need to do much more to address this point through their education programmes. However, based entirely on my subjective experience rather than anything more scientific, I think that this issue is less linked to employment sector than we might think. I come across lots of reps from all industrial backgrounds who are hooked up with far more technology than me, even if they aren’t always using it for trade union purposes.” – Trade union tutor, comment left on my website (Cyberunions 2010c)

I was surprised that so many survey respondents reported no barriers to the use of ICTs. I expected more instances of corporate IT policy, lack of time or knowledge and cost proving to be barriers. The digital divide is real, but sometimes appears in unexpected places.

### **Worship the glitch: it’s a feature, not a bug**

The brave new techno-utopia promised to us is rarely as seamless as it is meant to be. In my experience of making heavy use of new technology for union activity over the past year, I realised that technology is characterised by glitches as much as it empowers us with limitless information. This is not surprising considering that ICTs

are still very much in development, and still characterised by 'format wars' (Curtis 2009). Apart from a sometimes disturbing signal to noise ratio with all new media, the two main categories that glitches fell into were, in my experience, compatibility due to the lack of standard formats, and connectivity.

With regard to connectivity, we are sold hardware that does not yet have an adequate infrastructure to support it. Cloud computing, netbooks and smart phones all require high speed Internet connections to be available at all times, to be able to transmit high levels of data. Data is expensive, and rare. The 3G signal that is available across much of the UK is inadequate for providing a seamless experience. The situation in South Africa is similar: while a 3G signal is fairly ubiquitous, data is expensive and 'capped'. The practical outcome of this is that trade union activists, despite spending a lot of money on mobile tools, will frequently be frustrated by an inability to connect to the Internet.

### **FOSS and Creative Commons**

The idea of Creative Commons should not be strange to trade unionists: as labour folk musician Wood Guthrie wrote in the 1940s,

“This song is Copyrighted in U.S., under Seal of Copyright # 154085, for a period of 28 years, and anybody caught singin it without our permission, will be mighty good friends of ourn, cause we don’t give a dern. Publish it. Write it. Sing it. Swing to it. Yodel it. We wrote it, that’s all we wanted to do.” (Klein 2006)

Embracing Creative Commons by deliberately sharing resources – and taking a more pluralist approach to organising – would give unions and their activists much more



effective tools. With regard to FOSS, although most users are not aware of this, there is a “software war” (Curtis 2009) between the two main proprietary formats, Windows and Mac, and the free and open Linux format. It is important for trade unions to take sides in that war, as it will determine whether information technology is controlled by corporations for profit, or by an accountable structure of users and developers. Unions need to join social movements campaigning to keep the Internet a free public sphere and Digital Commons, outside of the control of large corporations. Aside from the ideological questions, FOSS provides useful free tools for trade union activists. FOSS also tends to work better on older computers than proprietary software, and is secure and not susceptible to viruses, making it ideal for developing countries or trade union activists without access to the latest equipment. Unions would dramatically empower their activists by salvaging old computer equipment, installing the appropriate FOSS, and giving it away, along with training in its use. In addition, switching union computers to FOSS would save tens of thousands of pounds in licensing costs.

### **Training and tools**

To allow their activists to make best use of ICTs, unions need to give them the necessary tools: this includes providing software, and specialised, bespoke training in creating branch websites, maintaining email lists and so on. Indeed, it would be an easy matter to create a union operating system, based on existing FOSS. Give the tools and skills to the activists, and encourage them to experiment widely. The success of this approach is demonstrated by the Unite organisers.

This includes providing cyber-activists with the “suite of software” identified by one survey respondent. Crucially, this software should enable them to network their activities with those of other union activists, creating online communities of practice. Also, by providing these tools, the union mitigates some of the potential problems of distributed discourse: that unelected, disruptive elements might have a disproportionate influence. By providing the tools, the union can also identify boundaries and fair use policies. If unions neglect to provide this kind of support and guidance, frustrated activists will be left to develop their own tools, and may bring the union into disrepute, or fall foul of company Internet policy, Facebook privacy settings or one of a number of other hazards. It seems reasonable to suggest that unions look to the Obama election campaign. By providing activists with tools, a diverse range of people – many of them young, and active for the first time – were mobilised (Blue State Digital 2009; Business Week 2008).

A large proportion of survey respondents indicated that they would like to receive training from their union. In my view, the most sensible way to do this would be to progressively integrate ICTs into existing union training programmes, so that technology is not seen by activists as a substitute for more traditional trade union activity, but a new tool to add to the arsenal. In addition to this, specialist courses should be made available. My personal experience of facilitating ICT learning for Unite members is that many find it personally empowering and are inclined to view the union favourably as a result. Workplaces with these learning programmes have tended to show increased membership participation as branches grow in confidence

and become more dynamic, a finding which is congruent with the insights of mobilisation theory (Kelly 1998) and the renewal thesis (Munck 2002).

### **Mobile phones**

Smart phones are becoming increasingly common in developing countries, and 69% of survey respondents had at least some experience using them. As these phones become more common, significant barriers to entry will be overcome, and more trade union activists will use Web 2.0 tools. In countries where these phones are less common, text messaging remains a powerful tool. More work needs to be done to use this in a systematic way, probably by using technology such as FrontlineSMS.

### **Using new media for propaganda**

While this research focuses primarily on the activities of activists, there is an opportunity for trade union organisations to make much better use of new media for propaganda. Much of the mainstream media, when not actively hostile to trade unions, misunderstands or misrepresents their views and actions, and the role unions play in protecting important public services. While it is important for unions to become more 'media savvy' in a way that ensures better coverage, it is also important to develop communication channels that bypass information gatekeepers and allow the union to tell its story directly and unmediated. New media allows this, but it has to be used carefully and strategically. Social movements and political organisations are much better at this than unions. Unions need to tell their side of the story with campaigning websites promoted through social media, and activist tools that are made freely available. By distributing discourse, unions can let their

members tell their story. There are enough union-friendly academics to provide the factual basis for an alternate, union-friendly narrative of a dispute.

## **7. Conclusions and recommendations**

Clearly, there is great potential for ICTs to facilitate renewal and revitalisation. So far, this has not been met, as unions have failed to keep up with, and make use of, technological advances. However, new Web 2.0 tools, and the increasing availability of smart phones, are closing the digital divide – at least in developed countries.

### **The Wei Ji moment – a precarious state<sup>14</sup>**

The financial crisis and the resulting job and budget cuts means there is an urgent need for consolidated action by unions. This is a perfect storm of circumstance, and we are likely to see trade union activists make increasing use of new technologies. Social media such as Twitter have reached a deep enough penetration in society that even trade unionists are using them, and when their full potential is grasped, we may see a burst of innovative, creative and powerful activity by union activists in cyberspace. They will use these technologies either with, or without the support of their unions.

The rate of technological change is fast and unpredictable and we cannot rely on a single technological solution. When I began my research, I thought Twitter was pointless. Currently I think it is a very powerful tool for distributing discourse. It is possible that in a year from now, it will be superseded. It is necessary to experiment with different technologies and to not invest too heavily in any single solution. It is also important to find the appropriate technology for the target group: websites are useless for people with no Internet connection, but coordinated used of text

messaging, or the appropriate use of radio, has great potential for unions in South Africa and in other developing countries.

Due to the move towards Web 3.0, we are going to be less and less tied into individual technologies. It will become easier to migrate to other services without losing data because of the way metadata is increasingly embedded in these tools. In the developed world, most people will soon be surrounded by webs of real time data that is relevant to them, and accessed through inexpensive mobile devices. This includes trade union negotiators who will have access to bargaining information, labour law updates and so on. Business will have the same tools, and to remain on a level playing field it will be important to utilise technology effectively.

### **Democratise, decentralise and distribute discourse**

We are in a rare historical moment of rapid technological change combined with economic and political crisis. To make the most of this state of flux, trade union leaders need to relinquish control and allow less rigid structures to develop. The trade union movement needs to be radically democratised and decentralised, with power devolved into the hands of workplace structures in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity. Autonomy is a powerful mobilising factor. Trade union leaders need to use their relative power to distribute discourse to their activists, and take a leading role in opening their organisations. Technological advances will cause trade union leaders to lose control of communication strategies. They would be better off relinquishing it gracefully: no cyber strategy will ever be successful if it is stuck in the iron grip of union bureaucracy. ICTs can and do distribute discourse.

However, due to the digital divide, most activity still clusters around hubs. While more needs to be done to bridge the divide, this fact should calm the nerves of trade union leaders who fear the iconoclastic consequences of ICTs being unleashed on their organisations. ICTs facilitate more fluid, horizontal and human organising, but there is little evidence that they fundamentally undermine or threaten trade union structures. The change they bring should be welcomed, rather than resisted, as new structures are likely to be dynamic and creative, and to attract new activists and members. Failure to do so will cause unions to lose power and become less relevant, stuck in shrinking manufacturing and public sectors, and increasingly marginalised from the consciousness of most workers.

Online campaigns can appear ephemeral. To give substance to their cyberunionism, unions need to tie their activity into existing renewal strategies, using technology tactically to reinforce offline campaigns. The solution to the crisis is not to move the union into cyberspace, but to use the democratising and iconoclastic potential of the web to strengthen workplace organisation, build better structures and increase collective bargaining coverage. The ability of new technology to keep members informed, and to mobilise them at crucial junctures, will be a key factor here. While a focus on organising and renewal is crucial, servicing should not be neglected. ICTs provide opportunities to service members inexpensively and effectively, and this should be embraced where ever possible.

## **Social Movement Unionism and New Labour Internationalism**

SMU is an effective route out of decline. A global SMU (Bezuidenhout 2000; 2002) is desirable, with trade unions explicitly situating themselves as part of global civil society. While different conditions mean that it would be neither possible nor desirable to import the SMU model wholesale from Brazil or South Africa, a greater engagement with social movements would be of benefit to trade unions in the UK. Trade union campaigns linked to social movements, and facilitated by distributed discourse using new technology, can build mutually sustaining communities of activism. Unions can mitigate the negative effect of the current weakness of the Labour Party by establishing roots in communities and linking themselves organically to campaigns for social justice. Social movements particularly attract young people who are disengaged from, or less than fully impressed by, the mainstream political parties. In Britain, they tend to be organised around environmental issues, opposition to war and surveillance and anti-poverty campaigns. To a large extent, these groups use social media better than unions do. Unions should learn from this use of social media, as well as consciously situating themselves within these campaigns. Waterman's (1992; 2006) new labour internationalism is a useful approach to adequately confronting the challenges posed by globalisation. A conscious strategy to foster shop floor internationalism and solidarity by using ICT – for instance, by workplace twinning campaigns – would be desirable.

## **Go Open Source**

FOSS offers powerful, free tools for trade unions and their activists, and a serious attempt should be made to adopt it, and to defend the freedom of the Internet. In



the UK, this includes working to repeal the Digital Economy Act<sup>15</sup>. However, there is a learning curve when adopting FOSS, and the focus should always be on usability – there are enough barriers to access without potentially creating more.

### **Industrial Workers of the World Wide Web**

Unions will not survive if they do not change. The way we live and work has changed, and the circumstances that gave rise to the trade union movement are increasingly rare in developed countries. Tomorrow's workers have grown up in cyberspace, and because there is little union presence there, they see no relevance in the labour movement. If we do not organise them, these workers may never have a secure union job, and they will face a world of low wage, insecure work. This may cause a new generation in the West to reinvent trade unionism, just as our Chinese brothers and sisters are doing now. However, it seems wasteful to not try to resurrect the aging dinosaurs that still lumber across the industrial terrain.

Tomorrow's workers are in cyberspace. Renewal is possible, and the space exists: it just needs to be occupied. Members need a new kind of organising and servicing, and they need it 'just in time'.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org)

<sup>2</sup> An iPhone is a smart phone, made by Apple, that is able to access the Internet. An app is a program that runs on the phone and uses its capabilities to fulfil a certain function. For example, a trade union negotiator's app might provide the latest bargaining indicators, or solidarity alerts.

<sup>3</sup> Anna Weekes is now known by her married name of Anna Majavu

<sup>4</sup> The COSATU Today blog at <http://ctminiblog.blogspot.com/> was last updated in 2008

<sup>5</sup> Free and Open Source Software is a broad (and contested) term that encompasses two related areas of software development. Stallman (2007) argues that Free Software is a social movement concerned primarily with freeing software from corporate control, while Open Source is a collaborative approach to software development with practical rather than ideological motivations. In this dissertation, I use both terms.

<sup>6</sup> I believe Freeman misunderstands 'open source' and uses it as a synonym for 'unstructured' or 'loosely organised'. Genuine open source developments are highly structured, due to the need to organise the work of thousands of volunteers. Open Source trade unionism would be structured, but transparent.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://linuxmint.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Survey Monkey is a useful online surveying tool that provides relatively deep analysis of data. See <http://www.surveymonkey.com>

<sup>9</sup> Really Simple Syndication

<sup>10</sup> See <http://ccisua.ning.com/>

<sup>11</sup> This small union is virtually the only union in South Africa to have any presence on Facebook, with a well-organised campaign page created by the general secretary and labour activist Mandy Moussouris. The page contains video and other useful information.

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=114379168575760>

<sup>12</sup> The Industrial Workers of the World is a small international syndicalist union.

<http://www.iww.org/>

<sup>13</sup> South African Labour Bulletin

<sup>14</sup> The Mandarin word Wei Ji is often mistranslated into English as meaning both 'crisis' and 'opportunity'. In reality, it means something more like 'precarious moment' and 'tipping point'.

<sup>15</sup> Critics argue that the Digital Economy Act (2010), available at [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2010/ukpga\\_20100024\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts2010/ukpga_20100024_en_1) gives unprecedented power to corporations to control the Internet. See, for example,

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/apr/16/digital-economy-act-cory-doctorow>