

Strengthening union democracy through connective and collective action logics

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Key points

- Social media such as Facebook forces unions to increase communication with members and makes rank-and-file dissent highly visible.
- Challenges can arise as a result of different emphases on collective and connective logics between online networks and established unions.
- Union success on social media requires a careful balancing act, maintaining the autonomy and agency of online networks without jeopardising traditional organisation.
- When harnessed by the labour movement, online networks can increase worker mobilisation and union democracy through increased membership engagement.
- *Collective* action logic refers to traditional organisational hierarchy and implies strong leadership and shared identity and ideology. *Connective* action logic is characteristic of non-hierarchical, de-centred networks with multiple identifications and looser ideological commitments, which are common online.
- Both logics must be combined to reap the benefits of both, but such a 'social media unionism' strategy requires great trust and implies some risk for unions if they are to support networks without maintaining control.

Introduction: why is social media important for unions?

In an age of digitalised activism and global decline in trade unionism, with a resulting loss of mobilisation power, the role of social media in union renewal and organising is increasingly important (Pasquier et al. 2020; Wood 2020). While unions may historically have been behind the digital curve (Houghton and Hodder 2019), union communication is increasingly focused online on existing social media platforms, such as Facebook, which has become the primary arena for looking at relationships between unions and their grassroots, or between the leadership and the rank-and-file. The question is not whether or not to engage with members online, but *how* to do so successfully.

This policy brief explores the relationship between trade unions and their grassroots in the context of the rapid expansion of social media technologies. I use an already established distinction between collective and connective action logics. The former refers to the traditional dominant hierarchical and stable organisations of the labour movements and the latter to more decentred and horizontal organisations, suitable for online networks. Through this distinction, I argue that social media can support union revitalisation and strengthen the labour movement's capacity to mobilise. When harnessed by unions, the potential for increased grassroots engagement through social media can be a valuable resource, in terms of both organising and improving internal union democracy. To this end, I share the conclusions of two recent case studies of union-grassroots interaction on social media in Denmark: the online grassroots workers' network 'Workers in Motion' and the bottom-up organising of food delivery couriers, the 'Wolt Workers' Group'. In both cases, social media was used extensively and in innovative ways by the grassroots and unions, leading to both challenges and opportunities for established union actors.

Grassroots on social media

Tensions between the rank-and-file and trade union leaders is not a consequence of digital technologies. Rather, organisational friction between grassroots and union leadership is as old as the labour movement itself and plays an important part in shaping unions (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019). Although it may pose challenges to union hierarchy, organisation and strategy, it is necessary for union revitalisation (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019). Crucially, unions must continuously balance between 'settlement and mobilisation logics' (Hansen and Hau 2022) as they mobilise workers, compromise with employers, and create consensus among members. Digital technologies are a key element of this.

It is an open question, however, whether new digital networking technologies such as social media enable greater trade union democracy and lead to union revitalisation. Social media is not a 'magic wand' (Pasquier and Wood 2018) that automatically brings membership engagement and union democracy. Whether social media becomes a democratising factor is subject to

external societal, political and economic conditions, and, most importantly, to union agency.

Moving beyond dichotomies, we must understand that the use and impact of technology is socially mediated. Therefore, union organisation is vital. Technologies perceived as 'objective' are subject to specific trade union choices and organisational cultures. Digital communication technologies provide specific *affordances* and constraints (Hennebert et al. 2021), but do not determine practice so much as allow for many different uses. This can be illustrated by a cup with a handle. This feature affords users the possibility to hold it 'the right way', by the handle, but does not preclude grasping the cup in any other way.

For grassroots, social media such as Facebook provides a ready-made platform for mobilisation. It is free, easy to use, and has literally billions of users, giving it a high network externality. Social media affords loose, horizontal networks with few external resources and an informal communication style, but there is no reason why established trade unions cannot also benefit from these tools.

Facebook and traditional mass media

With more than 3 billion members, Facebook is currently the world's largest social media platform. Therefore, it is primarily through Facebook that trade unions must communicate with members and potential members. Because Facebook is free and easily accessible, this is also where union grassroots communicate and organise, as these are not stable institutions with premises, employees and external resources. This may change, as younger generations favour newer platforms such as TikTok or Instagram. We should expect shifts in platform use, as this is a continuously evolving, highly technology-driven field.

Communicating on social media is distinct from trade unions' more traditional forms of mass communication, such as membership magazines, poster campaigns or newspapers.

Firstly, Facebook is characterised by multimedia communication, in which posts can contain images and videos in addition to text. Other social media – such as Instagram or TikTok – completely de-emphasise text in favour of visual material.

Secondly, Facebook has a much higher degree of dialogue between sender and recipient, as users can freely share and comment on content. This significant difference in the relationship between recipient and sender has the potential to decentralise and democratise communication through increased interaction, but this can also threaten established organisational hierarchies and planned media strategies.

Thirdly, Facebook – and other social media – are public mediums. Although comments are not necessarily representative of the attitudes of the broad membership, communication between users is highly visible to all followers. This visibility creates the social dynamic in social media communication, and Facebook is therefore characterised by *multi-way communication* and dynamic interplay between pages (senders), active users (receivers), and passive readers

(spectators). This makes increased interaction between trade union leadership and the wider membership possible. It also increases ways of marking dissent from union strategy and imposes greater demands on union transparency.

On social media, users post asynchronously and not always in direct communication with one another. What may appear at first to be intense arguments may simply be the effects of individuals expressing a multitude of opinions in a non-supervised, anarchic way. Precisely this unstructured debate is what potentially allows for increased candour and openness among members, however, as well as more communication between the 'rank-and-file' and trade union leadership.

An important caveat is that the 'free' dialogue on social media is ostensibly open but constrained by huge tech companies such as Meta or Google, which hold the proprietary rights to the algorithms that control the ordering and presentation of posts, which determines what end users see on their screens. Furthermore, while social media is powerful for mobilising, a bell once struck cannot be unring. Once trade unions are committed to an online social media presence, they are in constant communication with members and potential members. This line of communication must be maintained, even for example during collective bargaining with employers, where transparency can possibly be detrimental to the clandestine nature of negotiation and compromise.

Collective vs connective action

To better understand mobilisation online, a crucial distinction has been proposed between different action logics in 'traditional' unionism and in digital activism with social movement characteristics. The first, *collective action* implies strong leadership, organisational hierarchy and shared identities and ideologies (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). The other, 'newer' *connective action* refers to non-hierarchical, decentred networks with multiple identifications and personalised action frames (Pasquier et al. 2020). While online issues may represent similar topics to 'traditional' collective action, such as labour rights, women's equality or social justice, the mechanisms for organising action are more personalised, de-emphasising group identity, membership or ideology in favour of personal action frames, such as individual stories, memes or easily sharable content. Collective action frames are more demanding of participants, requiring them to identify with established political organisations, set ideologies, or specific class, gender or ethnic identities. Collective action is coordinated and stable, while connective action is bottom-up and emergent.

Certainly, this distinction is archetypical and most organisations and forms of mobilisation will use both, emphasising one or the other. Because social media tends to blur the distinction between public and private, however, and because of the aforementioned affordances that lower the threshold for grassroots groups to mobilise, connective action logic through networks, grassroots groups, and social movements is more prevalent on social media.

The fundamental question then becomes how trade unions can harness the vitality and flexibility of online grassroots networks – the connective action logic – without compromising their traditional organisational culture based on

leadership and shared identity, collective action logic.

Trade unions facilitating network participation without outright control has shown clear advantages. This can provide new forms of collective action, a ‘grassroots’ image, and shared feelings of togetherness among a dispersed work force (Pasquier and Wood 2018). Importantly, unions must act as ‘orchestrators’ (Wood 2020) of ‘flashmob unionism’ (Pasquier et al. 2020) or adopt ‘social media unionism’ supporting autonomous networks (Hau and Savage 2022). They must also work to integrate the grassroots on- and offline, being attentive to processes of internal democracy and transparency (Hau and Hansen 2022). I now offer two short case studies of how unions can bridge collective and connective action logics.

Case I – Workers in Motion

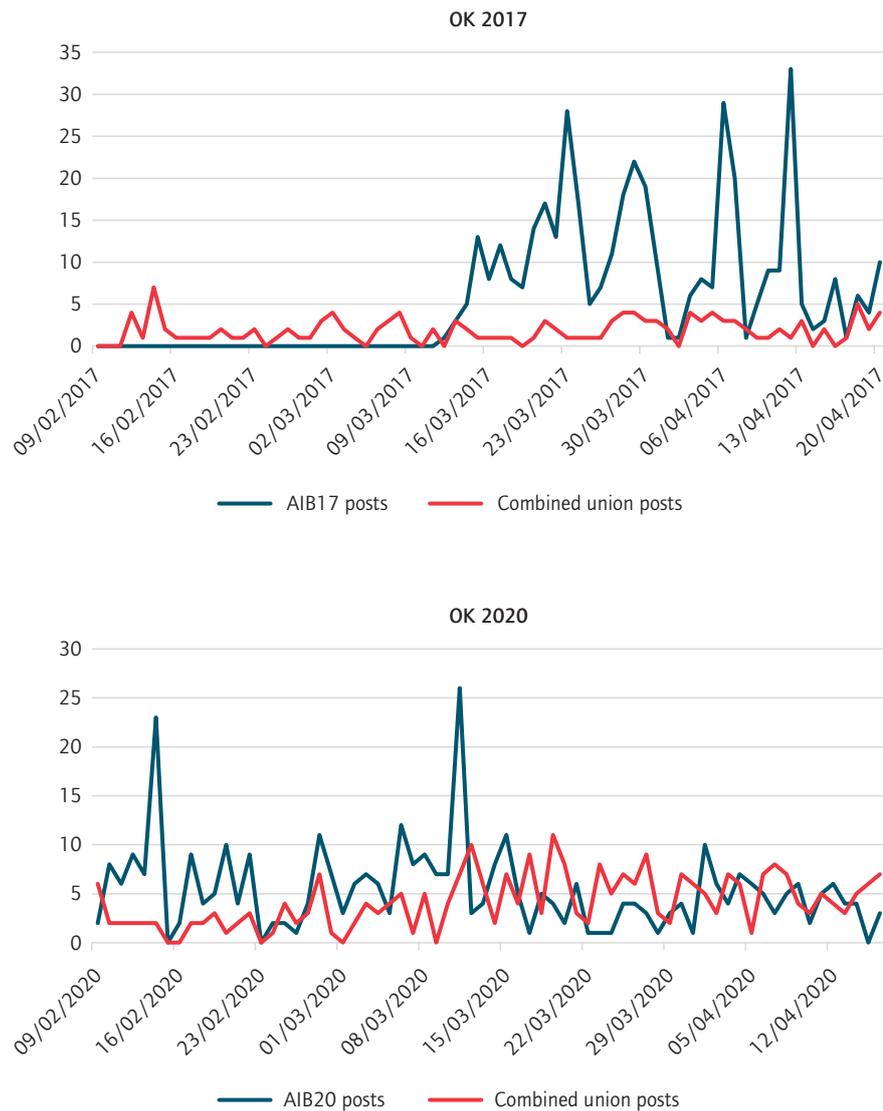
We compared the Facebook pages of three Danish national unions (Dansk Metal, 3F and FOA), with a combined membership of 554,000, and one online grassroots network, ‘Workers in Motion’ (AIB, ‘*Arbejdere i Bevægelse*’). We collected a full set of Facebook posts during two collective bargaining rounds in 2017 and 2020 (n=1.185), and performed 31 qualitative interviews with trade union officials and online grassroots activists.

As Figure 1 shows, the grassroots network dominated on social media in terms of number of followers, posts and reach, although trade unions vastly increased their general presence on social media between 2017 and 2020 to confront the communicative challenge ‘from below’. The autonomous network of grassroots activists in AIB involved a changing roster of activists with no fixed organisation, coordinating their efforts through direct, online meetings. This allowed them to post more often than unions and at any time, for example during off-hours at the weekend or in the evening. Because the grassroots network did not engage in bargaining or have coordinated strategies, they could also be freer in their criticisms of employers, eschew compromise and emphasise bottom-up co-creation without needing to control the message or maintain leadership.

Particularly the AIB network used mobilisation posts, calling for action, highlighting employee grievances, and emphasising worker solidarity and employer antagonism. Conversely, trade union posts focus more on ‘neutral’ news and updates on the collective bargaining process to keep members informed and engaged.

For the trade union leadership, the loss of control online in 2017 was perceived as detrimental to the bargaining effort, but also led to a critical examination of union practices. Part of the solution to the ‘grassroots challenge’ lay in strengthening processes of members’ voice on bargaining matters and in improving face-to-face communication between the top and bottom of the union organisation.

Figure 1 Union and grassroots posts in collective bargaining rounds in 2017 and 2020



Source: Hau and Hansen, forthcoming. Author's elaboration.

While the connective action logic of the AIB grassroots significantly challenged Danish trade unions online and forced them to increase their presence on social media, it also had significant effects offline. In 2020, unions sought to manage discontent by increasing physical meetings with members to present the bargaining settlement, prepared communication strategies for dealing with dissatisfied grassroots, and put a stronger focus on explaining the merits of the settlement to members. Unions were forced to allocate substantial time, effort and monetary resources to their social media presence, which could have been used elsewhere. While online grassroots networks can represent a challenge to union communication and complicate collective bargaining strategies, they also push union leaderships to adopt new technologies more quickly and improve their incorporation of members' concerns during the settlement vote. The unions, forced to adapt to the velocity and flexibility of online connective action logics, saw positive effects on transparency, internal

union democracy and their capacity for collective action. While subject to many other factors, the results of the collective bargaining vote seem to indicate a positive shift: in 2017, 56.5 per cent of members voted to accept the settlement, and only around 14,000 more ‘no-votes’ out of a total of 200,000 cast could have triggered a major industrial conflict. The 2020 settlement, however, was voted through with 79.8 per cent ‘yes-votes’, indicating higher membership satisfaction with negotiators and the settlement.

Case II – The Wolt Workers’ Group

In the second case, we examined an online grassroots union initiative for Wolt delivery couriers in Denmark, the Wolt Workers’ Group (WWG). Through participant observation as a Wolt courier and 17 semi-structured interviews with Wolt workers, key WWG activists and trade union liaison organisers, we analysed the (social) media strategies of the small activist group, their mobilisations such as the #NoPayCuts strike in February 2020, and their relationship with the large 3F union.

It was found once again that social media offered new forms of linkage and interaction between trade union leadership and grassroots in a strategy termed here ‘social media unionism’ (Hau and Savage 2022). This strategy implies outsourcing online communication and respecting the autonomy of networks while supporting activists through resources and mentoring. Our research shows that building coalition networks online is cost-effective, and that social networks can constitute flexible and dynamic, emergent labour organisations when scaffolded by unions.

Crucially, these efforts *supplement* rather than *supplant* already-existing successful union organising strategies and allow unions simultaneously to harness connective action logics online through their outsourced activist networks without compromising traditional collective action logics inherent in union organisation, coordinated strategy and leadership.

By acting merely as a facilitator and allowing for decentralised, networked action rather than attempting to bureaucratised the WWG network and integrate it into union structures, 3F took advantage of the *affordances* of digital social media technologies. As a flexible organising strategy, such ‘social media unionism’ requires a great degree of trust between organisations, and implies some risk for the trade union in terms of spending resources on a network over which it exerts only weak control. This weak control means that the network may be a ‘loose cannon’, whose activities – such as direct action protests or strong statements online – may create contention with employers and hamper unions’ ability to reach compromises. When carefully managed, however, partnerships between established unions and digitally-enabled grassroots through a ‘social media unionism’ strategy that maintains the autonomy, agency and connective action vitality of online networks hold great promise for further organising harder to reach workers in the emerging platform economy.

Social media has been shown to be particularly helpful in reaching out to marginalised groups and creating communities for people who might otherwise lack support, such as platform workers, migrants, LGBTQI and ethnic minorities,

women in male-dominated fields, or the differently abled. The connective action logics prevalent on social media allow a more personal political engagement compared with the collective action logics of a hierarchical organisation in which minorities may feel marginalised or invisible (Wright et al. 2022). Trade unions must find a way to embrace and balance such concerns, recognising the strength of both connective and collective action logics.

Conclusion

Using the framework of connective and collective action logics, this brief has analysed the interplay between unions and their grassroots in the digital age. The two cases illustrate the possibilities and challenges of social media for union revitalisation and membership engagement.

While the medium of social media is important, we must be attentive to the fact that communication technologies do not in themselves change action dynamics. A large online network may be characterised by collective action logic (Pasquier et al. 2020). Furthermore, collective and connective action can co-exist – and do so quite fruitfully, as seen in the second case study of this brief. Striking the balance between collective and connective action logics will allow unions to benefit from both coordinated strategies and organisational flexibility, for example by developing looser, more autonomous relations with member groups.

One issue with online spaces is the tendency for organisations to replicate offline interaction, and to see this as the ideal. By understanding the different logics in connective and collective action, trade unions can become more attentive to balancing the need for (online) grassroots vitality and coordinated organisation. One way, as the first case in this brief shows, involves unions increasing their presence on social media in response to grassroots, and to increase transparency and membership engagement offline to anticipate and accommodate possible rank-and-file dissent. Another, evidenced by the second case, has unions outsourcing online grassroots organising and communication to autonomous networks and activists with little oversight or control in a ‘social media unionism’ strategy. This maintains different action logics for different purposes, allowing for flexible and emergent labour organisations without compromising traditional hierarchies.

An important caveat is that the potential for increased grassroots dissent online can represent a threat to trade union leadership through the struggle to (re)define the norms guiding union democracy and communication. This can potentially be problematic in the face of powerful employers and lead to a possible loss of membership legitimacy and de facto loss of control. Online groups marked by connective action logics should also be seen, however, as a democratic and activist resource that can lead to greater mobilising power and positive effects on internal union democracy through increased focus on incorporating rank-and file concerns and greater transparency.

In sum, as digital technologies and social media become increasingly important in everyday life, the future for trade unions involves striking a balance between ‘old’ and ‘new’ ways of mobilising. These should be complementary;

while collective action logics focus on centrally coordinating worker mobilisation against employers to gain structural power, connective action logics – through digital technologies – facilitate autonomous bottom-up groupings of workers and allow members to pursue their own goals and ideas. Both action logics are necessary elements of union renewal and for maintaining the labour movement's vitality in the digital age.

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