



Trade Unions on YouTube: Conclusions

Abstract It has been claimed that various social media platforms can be important means for trade union revitalization: social media can reach groups traditionally difficult to organize; it can be used for political campaigning and social media is also an important tool for image management. Analysing Swedish trade unions' use of YouTube confirms that YouTube is a means for union revitalization although many of the videos posted first and foremost target members and the general public and thus have less clear connections to the revitalization debate. Comparing unions organizing employees with different class backgrounds, we find that the upper-middle-class unions particularly targeted youth in their YouTube videos, the working-class unions are the ones most devoted to political activism, and that the white-collar unions are particularly keen on using YouTube for image management.

Keywords Social media · Trade union movement · Revitalization · YouTube · Social classes

ICT—and social media in particular—has been presented as a new way of mobilizing movements due to its speed, coverage and low costs: it no longer takes days or weeks to organize meetings, demonstrations or campaigns. Social media can change and certainly has influenced how social movements mobilize (Earl and Kimport 2011; Mattoni and Treré 2014). Whether, how and to what degree 'old' social movements such

as trade unions have adopted this new means of communication is one of the most important research questions for scholars within the field of union research to disentangle. What do trade unions actually *do* and *say* on social media? Our analyses of trade unions' actions online shed some light upon this issue. In contrast to prior studies examining unions' own accounts of how they use social media (Kerr and Waddington 2014; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett 2015), we examined unions' actual 'actions' on social media. Thus, our analysis of Swedish trade unions' use of YouTube provides an important contribution to this research field.

We argue that in order to better understand how trade unions use social media, it is necessary to account for the class background of the union members, among other factors. Trade unions are not cohesive actors; rather, all unions have unique traits. But for unions that organize employees, the status of the union members on the labour market plays an important role in how the union uses various means of communication. We have shown that working-class unions use YouTube differently than white-collar or upper-middle-class unions, for two reasons. First, the structural transformation of the economy—the so-called third industrial revolution—has led to major changes in employment conditions. While the industrial era in Western Europe was characterized by stable jobs and by working hours that were mainly determined by the industry, post-industrial society is defined by an increasingly important service sector and a diminishing industrial sector (Pashev et al. 2015). In the wake of these structural changes, many countries have experienced labour reforms dismantling laws on job security and working conditions (Kalleberg 2009; Standing 2011), resulting in the growth of precarious employment. This shift has placed all the trade unions in a new situation. Trade unions have traditionally been successful in organizing workers within the industrial sector; as a result, trade unionism has had the industrial sector as its organizational norm. The contemporary societal changes mean that unions must adapt to new circumstances when recruiting new members—for example, by addressing more diverse groups of employees. This new type of recruitment requires the use of a variety of strategies to attract the attention of a diverse set of potential members. In the Swedish case, where otherwise similar trade unions organize employees from different social classes, the shrinking of the working class and the simultaneous growth of the middle class have changed the trade union landscape: union density is increasing among white-collar workers and the upper middle class, whereas working-class

unions are in decline. Thus, different Swedish unions have a different need to attract new members and a different ‘supply’ of potential members—factors that subsequently affect how the unions use social media.

Second, the growth of the middle class is changing the character of the trade union movement. In the past, the historically close relationship between working-class unions and the social democratic and left parties made it easy for unions to engage in politics. Scholars of trade union revitalization have also suggested political activism as a means of union renewal. However, engaging in politics is more challenging for white-collar and upper-middle-class unions than for working-class unions. The ideological leaning of the contemporary middle class is very diverse, making it difficult to address the members of these unions with political messages related to the politics of a specific party. Political campaigns could eventually delegitimize the unions. Therefore, the ways in which trade unions choose to frame their communication via social media were expected to vary and did in fact do so.

Three major conclusions were formed based on the analyses outlined in this book. First, we assumed that since one of the biggest challenges for the contemporary trade union movement is organizing trade union members, unions would be particularly eager to use social media to target specific groups that have been difficult to organize in unions. Scholars examining trade union revitalization have pointed out the necessity to not only retrieve lost members, but also find new ones. Our analyses, however, yielded unexpected results. Trade unions mainly addressed union members and the general public in their YouTube videos. Only the upper-middle-class unions affiliated with the union confederation Saco were particularly focused on targeting a specific group on YouTube—namely youth. Directing videos towards members can, however, solve another long-standing union problem: that of information dispersion within the movement. The more transparent organizations are about the activities of their leaders, the decisions that are made and their plans for future activities, the more their members can trust them. For ‘old’ social movement organizations, such as unions, transparency may be a particularly important issue to address, since over time, the organization will become more complex than a new movement would be. Therefore, it is reasonable for unions to care about the dispersion of internal affairs and to focus on internal democracy. While less institutionalized movements have seen social media as an opportunity to quickly and cheaply mobilize people for events such as protest actions,

the Swedish unions seem to view YouTube as an opportunity to communicate with their members.

Second, by scrutinizing the degree to which trade unions use YouTube to engage in political campaigns, we have shown that working-class unions affiliated with the LO are the most devoted to political activism, particularly during election campaigns. Although the other unions also seemed to be active during election years, their activities were aimed at impacting the political agenda and debate in Sweden. This was done by emphasizing issues that were important to their members (most of these videos were connected to the welfare state) without supporting a particular political party's policy solutions. Of course, this finding should be considered within the context of the political preferences of the middle class: unions must engage in political campaigns in order to be perceived as relevant and to serve the interests of their members, but being 'too political' (i.e. advocating one party's political preferences) can scare off members and potential members. Despite the theoretical opportunities to mobilize protest action through social media, the trade unions in our study hardly employed such strategies at all. Considering that other sources have testified that contentious action from the unions did occur during the time period under study (Uba 2016), we can only conclude that the unions did not use YouTube to display such actions.

Finally, we focused on the unions' self-images, as presented in their YouTube videos. Movements and organizations cherish their self-images because they are important for member recruitment as well as for retaining existent members, building organizational identities and controlling how the organization is perceived by others. Our analysis of the self-images presented in the videos not only revealed that the unions in question have dealt with the union crisis differently, but also demonstrated how the unions have changed in character. The working-class unions are still traditionally social democratic; they displayed strong collectivism in their videos. Strong collectivism was also displayed by the upper-middle-class unions affiliated with Saco. In the latter case, the 'collective' referred to a very strong shared professional identity, whereas in the former case, the 'collective' still mainly referred to class. Unlike the LO- and Saco-affiliated unions, which displayed collectivism, the white-collar unions emphasized the individual benefits of joining a union. The two white-collar unions analysed in Chapter 4—Unionen and Vision—have clearly embraced revitalization, not only through name changes and amalgamations, but also in terms of image management. In their videos,

both unions appear to be selling membership rather than mobilizing people within a social movement. It can be claimed that Unionen and Vision have adopted Mancur Olson’s message: that selective incentives will make people join unions (Olson 1965). This strategy has seemingly paid off; as shown in the Fig. 4.2, the memberships of these two unions are growing in size. Still, organizing the middle class is difficult, especially in a country such as Sweden, which is well known for widespread individualistic values (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Refraining from defining a union in terms of specific values or ideologies makes it possible to recruit members with very different ideological positions; therefore, this may be the most successful route to organizing the middle class. Historically, both Unionen and Vision have had narrower membership bases and more pronounced values than displayed in their YouTube videos (Jansson 2019). As structural changes decrease the size of the working class and blurring the line between the workers and the white-collar workers, it is possible that the organizational traits displayed by Vision and Unionen will become more common in future.

All these results demonstrate that the class background of a union is an important factor to account for when examining how unions use YouTube for revitalization strategies. Our investigation made use of three kinds of analyses—a rough quantitative analysis of more than 4500 videos, a qualitative analysis of 624 randomly selected videos and a detailed content analysis of approximately 60 videos. Of these, the relatively new method that was used in this study within the context of trade union research—that is, the usage of YouTube metadata—requires further reflection.

5.1 EXAMINING YOUTUBE: WHAT CAN BE INFERRED FROM METADATA?

The YouTube video titled ‘How to get a raise in 47 seconds’, which was uploaded by the Swedish Municipal Workers’ Union in March 2014, gained more than 290,000 views and almost 500 likes by the end of 2016. If the union had not removed this video from its channel, by now it would probably be one of the most popular videos produced by the Swedish trade unions in terms of views and likes. Of course, this video—and trade union videos in general—is much less popular than typical YouTube entries focusing on entertainment. Nevertheless, being present

in a social media channel is only one part of general labour movement activism; it is well known that social movements combine offline mobilization with online efforts (Earl 2016; Vraga et al. 2014).

Thus, this book examines only a tiny part of Swedish trade unions' everyday organizing and mobilization, and certainly only a fraction of the measures that are being taken to revitalize the union movement, since many of these strategies occur purely offline. That said, we consider that the videos unions have uploaded to YouTube over a period of almost a decade are useful for studying general trends in how unions use social media.

First, the metadata analysis in this book primarily made use of the titles and descriptions that were provided by the unions when they uploaded the videos (in Chapters 2 and 3); the timing of when the video was uploaded (in Chapter 3); and the numbers of views and likes the videos received from the moment of uploading until the end of 2016 (in Chapters 2 and 3). Although the timing of the upload was very useful when analysing unions' political activism, we also observed that the unions tended to remove many of their videos after they had been up on YouTube for a while. Although some of the removed videos might be uploaded again by private users, the volatility of this data should be of concern for scholars interested in further analysis of YouTube videos.

Information on the numbers of views and likes can be used to detect the popularity of YouTube videos and is thus important and interesting when comparing organizations, video types or video messages. On the other hand, these anonymous numbers are not as informative as the comments made by YouTube viewers in response to specific videos. While scholars of YouTube communication do use viewer comment data as well, we were not able to do so in this case because of the small number of comments and the fact that unions often remove comments they perceive as unpleasant. Thus, we could not make use of all the possible options provided by the metadata available for YouTube videos.

Still, the video titles and descriptions appeared to be useful. The results of the rough quantitative analysis based on the titles and descriptions of more than 4500 videos did not differ too much from the results of the qualitative analysis of 624 randomly selected videos. However, the analysis of the titles and descriptions did underestimate the proportion of videos targeting members and precarious workers and overestimated the proportion of videos targeting youth and the general public (Chapter 2). These flaws in the analysis of the large N sample are not surprising,

because watching a video (as was done for the smaller qualitative analysis) makes it easier to detect the targeted audience than simply reading a video description. When analysing the videos' messages and political campaigns. It is clear that the results presented in Chapter 4 would not have been possible to achieve with the use of metadata alone; therefore, a mixed-methods approach holds further benefit for social media analysis.

5.2 FOR THE FUTURE

This book has shown that Swedish trade unions representing different social classes—that is, the working class, middle class and upper middle class—use different revitalization strategies via YouTube. Working-class unions are active in electoral politics, upper-middle-class unions target young people and white-collar unions attract members by focusing on benefits rather than on ideas of solidarity. Above all, the studied trade unions all use YouTube to disperse information about organizational work to their members. It is likely that similar patterns of attracting new members, improving internal democracy and demonstrating political (electoral) activism would be found in YouTube videos uploaded by unions in other countries. Uploading videos to YouTube is not a rare Swedish phenomenon, and future studies should certainly delve deeper into cross-national comparisons: Do unions' videos have similar themes across nations or do they differ? Are unions in other countries also primarily targeting members? Do white-collar workers in other countries engage in political campaigns (in contrast to Swedish white-collar workers)? Answering such questions would deepen our understanding of trade unions' social media use.

Unions are slowly moving their videos to other platforms (mainly Facebook); thus, future studies should not neglect such platforms. It could be suggested that due to the differing dominant audiences of these platforms (e.g. the average YouTube user and the average Facebook user vary significantly in age), important variations may occur based on the platform unions use to upload their videos.

Although the use of information and communication technology and social media can benefit unions' mobilization, it is certainly not the panacea for revitalization or distributing power between employers and unions or within the union movement between union members and leaders (Upchurch and Grassman 2016; Hodder and Houghton 2015). The Internet, and particularly social media, can be used for ridiculing

and suppressing groups with alternative ideas within unions or used by a digitally aware elite for increasing its power (Lucio et al. 2009). Our conversations with union activists also indicate that the comment fields related to the YouTube videos are carefully observed. In other words, hierarchies, conflicts and dilemmas that exist offline can be transferred to online mediums, and new dilemmas can occur, such as the need to constantly monitor the social media feeds for handling inappropriate or offensive comments. Thus, social media should be considered as a medium, and there are multiple ways that this medium can be used and misused. Whether or not social media is good or bad for revitalization is beyond this study but a crucial question for future research to examine.

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