



Trade Union Membership and the Internet: Lessons from Civil Society

William Davies

Institute for Public Policy Research

The internet is famous for eliciting false predictions. These generally fall into an optimistic camp and a pessimistic one. The former includes things like the alleged end of the business cycle and the death of distance; the latter focuses on imminent chaos and the end of face-to-face communities. But at the root of these false predictions lies the same mistake: the belief that online activity will *replace* offline activity. The boom and bust of the dotcom era represented both sides of this falsehood. During the boom, it was believed that the online community and e-commerce would sweep traditional organisations aside. Their failure to do this led many people to lose interest in the internet altogether.

Nearly five years after the dotcom crash, a far more sober perspective on the internet is forming, in terms of its economic and social possibilities. This paper aims to highlight some of the best social analysis of the internet, and examines its implications for the trade union movement. A growing body of evidence and observation highlights what possibilities the internet introduces for civil society and membership organisations broadly understood. While the unique status of trade unions should not be forgotten, it is worth seeing trade unions alongside other forms of membership organisation, in order to see what the technology implies for the nature of membership *per se*. At the end of the paper, I outline what implications this might have.

Social capital

The term ‘social capital’ was popularised in the late 1990s by the American political theorist, Robert Putnam, and in particular by his book *Bowling Alone*.ⁱ He defines social capital as the “networks, norms and trust” which knit society together, either as informal grass-roots organisations such as churches or baby-sitting circles, or as more organised national membership organisations such as trade unions.ⁱⁱ As a unit of analysis, social capital is a useful way of studying social connectivity as a thing (and often a benefit) in its own right - which is why it has also been a useful way of studying the social aspect of technological connectivity and the internet. Putnam’s claim – supported by a growing body of evidence – is that association and membership is important to our economic, psychological, political and even physical well-being, in addition to being an important ingredient in well-functioning democracies.



Trade unions represent a critical part of British social capital. With union density still at around a third of the labour market, they remain one of the most successful forms of membership organisation in the UK. However, given that this was close to two thirds in the 1970s, their decline in membership is the single biggest factor in trends in social capital over the past thirty years.ⁱⁱⁱ Moreover, this decline has exacerbated a worrying feature of British society, whereby social capital is growing amongst the middle classes, but falling amongst working class people. Generally speaking, middle class people tend increasingly to join formal membership associations, where they can develop 'bridging social capital' with those who they meet in a public environment, while working class people commonly rely on more tight-knit, informal networks of friends and family - what is known as 'bonding social capital'. One of the problems with this outcome is that bridging social capital acts as an important means of circulating information, and providing access to labour markets.

In addition to this split between middle class and working class membership trends, a further phenomenon observed by social capital analysts is the impact of consumerism on voluntary associations. A transactional relationship with membership organisations has become more common, whereby a direct debit leaves the member's bank account once a month, mailouts fall through their letter box every so often, and very little additional commitment is given. Organisations such as Greenpeace – which is not a membership organisation at all – exhibit this, while unions themselves are vulnerable to a growing attitude that they exist as insurance policies for when things go wrong, rather than a basis for voice or political representation on a day-to-day basis.

At an informal level, this is manifest in what Canadian sociologist, Barry Wellman, has termed 'networked individualism'. This refers to a tendency in Western societies, and in cities in particular, for individuals to construct their social lives around their chosen identities, rather than to allow those identities to be defined for them by their communities. In traditional communities, individuals would most likely identify with their local community, and the culture into which they were born. As society modernises, and technology develops, individuals can seek out the communities which they choose to associate with, and bi-pass those which they feel less in common with.

Once again, trade unions display this shift in associating behaviour. Research shows that one of the most significant determinants of whether a worker joins a union is whether anyone in their family has ever been a member: sons and daughters of union members are 20% more likely to join one.^{iv} Where someone is born into a unionised environment, then they may well see unions as being 'for them'. But beyond this, the problem unions face is that they must compete for an individual's affiliation in the same way that consumer goods do. They can no longer rely on class identity or professional identity, in order to convince individuals that they hold the same values. The danger is that frustration with the



injustices of the market spill out as a fractured and incoherent mass of individual (and individualised) voices, rather than through unified and representative voice. The anti-capitalist movement is testimony to this.

In summary, then, while unions may hold a unique legal status and economic role in the UK, and while they may be historically one of the most influential forces in civil society, the challenges they face in organising mirror many of the dominant sociological tendencies of western societies. Firstly, formal membership is becoming split by class, as working class people are increasingly likely to associate in an informal, and private fashion, relying on 'bonding social capital'. Secondly, formal membership associations themselves must appeal to more sceptical and independent consumers, and find it harder to win support from committed and homogeneous activists.

Civil society in the UK displays a growing phenomenon of what I call 'semi-formal membership'. This can mean two things. On the one hand, it may mean formal membership that is conditional and transactional, where individuals contribute where it suits their interests and cultural identity, and sign off when it doesn't. On the other hand, it can mean informal social affiliation but which has become quasi-institutional or tribal. Social networks that are conscious of themselves, their rules and rituals can almost appear like membership associations sometimes. The internet plays a key role in sustaining semi-formal associations, and I now turn to look at this.

The internet and civil society

The internet began as a tool for the military and academics in the 1960s, and then became used by 'geek' communities in the 1970s, who used it socially with tools such as Usenet. In the early 90s, web-browsers were developed, and the technology gradually permeated the mainstream, with email becoming a popular means of communication. Today, 53% of British people use the internet at home, while approximately two thirds use it at least occasionally. Meanwhile, government initiatives such as UK Online centres mean that 96% of people are now aware of somewhere nearby that they can get online for free if they want to.

A number of claims have been made about how the internet affects voluntary association and civil society. The idea of the 'virtual community', in which people used the internet to create associations without any face-to-face contact, was popular in the mid 1990s, leading some social capital thinkers to fear that it could lead to a decline in face-to-face, local interaction. In the United States, an article called 'The Internet Paradox' was published in 1998, as internet penetration was at around 40%.^v The paradox in question was that this technology, which was built around a principle of connectivity, was producing "less social engagement and poorer psychological well-being" on the part of its users.



However, there has also been celebration of a medium that potentially enables a global civil society. The Jubilee 2000 Drop the Debt campaign is one example of a successful, large-scale mobilisation using the internet. Since then, more disruptive and unexpected campaigns have used the internet to develop and then organise, such as the fuel protests, The Countryside Alliance and Stop the War. It is widely believed that grass-roots text messaging was what tipped public opinion against the Spanish government, in the wake of the Madrid bomb and in the run-up to the election.

It is extremely rare for online campaigning and 'virtual' associations to be entirely divorced from traditional, offline, place-based and face-to-face campaigns. Again, we should be wary of believing that use of the internet replaces traditional ways of doing things. There are some campaigns which remain largely virtual, but they tend to relate to internet-related politics (such as copyright law), and in any case, usually rely on some moment of 'real' visibility in order to win publicity from broadcast media. Al Qaeda might even be considered an example of a 'virtual community' becoming 'real', given that the 9/11 hijackers had never previously met before September 11th 2001, and did so on that day primarily to attract media attention.^{vi}

Our purpose here is not to assert whether the internet is 'good' or 'bad' for trade unions, but to examine what its social capabilities are, and how these might benefit or undermine trade unions in their organising efforts. I will now set out what I see as some of the key capabilities and traits of the internet:

- *Placeless community*

This is what the internet has been famed for over the past decade, with expressions such as the 'death of distance' and 'the global village' supporting the view that this is primarily a tool to support distributed communities. The error made is in thinking that a long-distance communication device means that strangers will suddenly start to associate with one another (the birth of the telephone was greeted with similar responses). On the contrary, long distance communication devices are most useful to social networks that become distributed, after they are already formed, such as diasporas.

While it is true that we are becoming more mobile in the UK, it is also the case that most people's day-to-day activities take place within a radius of around thirteen miles.^{vii} This being the case, most social uses of the internet are also local, between people who see each other fairly regularly anyway. Where online social contact is not local, it will usually have to be accompanied by higher rates of travel in order to be sustained through occasional face-to-face contact. Regular social or civic interaction online rarely happens between people who have not met. In general, solely computer-mediated communication is only sufficient to sustain a fairly narrow array of social activities, most commonly:

- **Very codified types of interaction** – e.g. online banking, open source software development, playing chess, eBay.
- **Activities where there is a strong sense of shared identity** - e.g. dialogue between people suffering the same rare disease, between excluded minorities living in secluded areas, communities with an unusually strong sense of political injustice.
- **Activities where face-to-face interaction is undesirable** – e.g. it is illegal (such as terrorist organisations), it is embarrassing (such as teenagers' flirting), it is frightening (reporting crime).

- 'Asynchronous' communication

'Asynchronous communication' is communication in which participants can contribute at different times. A chain of emails, for instance, can stretch out a discussion over several hours of days, with each user contributing at different times. This makes it fundamentally unlike a telephone, or a face-to-face meeting. One of the main reasons why email remains so common inside offices – one study found that 50% of email traffic in an office was internal – is that it is the asynchronicity being exploited, and not the distance-killing capability.

The other benefit of this is that an automatic record of the communication gets created. people can scan past communication, and contribute even if they have missed the beginning of the discussion. In addition, emails act as a useful (or not so useful record) of what was said, and by whom. This means that it creates histories even where they are not wanted, which can often quash the ambiguity or humour from communication. Asynchronous communication is therefore helpful in certain specific cases:

- **Where people's lifestyles mean that their free time is no longer in synch** – e.g. flexible and irregular working hours, people with a greater number of social commitments, two-income households where free time must be organised around childcare.
- **Where communities need a way of creating their own history** – e.g. low-budget sports clubs, informal networks that wish to become more established.
- **Where formality is required** – e.g. a record may be required for legal purposes.

- Social search

The search capabilities of the internet are well known, though mainly as a means of finding information. However, the same search capabilities are equally useful for finding and locating people. Recent developments in 'social software', such as weblogs, social networking sites and introduction agencies, have shown that in certain circumstances, the internet can be a useful way of facilitating face-to-face interaction between people.

The success stories here have been primarily in business and in dating. Sites like www.friendster.com enable people to view online profiles of their friends' friends and their friends' friends' friends, which has its greatest use when looking for a date. Sites like www.linkedin.com help business-people stay in touch with their associates, and interact with people who may be several 'degrees of separation away from them. More relevantly to trade unions, the BBC's new civic portal www.bbc.co.uk/ican helps people find others who share their concerns, either locally or non-locally, and gives them ways of interacting, plus routes by which they can take their concerns to another level. Cases where this can be useful include:

- **Where there is a strong desire for people to meet, but not 'just anyone'** – e.g. dating, entrepreneurs
- **Where people simply need a minimal level of trust for one specific purpose** – e.g. eBay, finding a baby-sitter, finding a car mechanic.

- **'Scalability'**

To say that social behaviour 'scales' is to say that it can grow in size without being affected. For instance, capitalism 'scales' in that it works within a village, and as a global system. What makes the internet utterly unique as a medium is that it can support any scale of social interaction. A private email can support a chat between a husband and wife; an office circular can share a joke around 100 people; an online newspaper can be sent out to millions of people around the world. All of these occur using the same medium, which has never before been possible.

In civil society, it is important that associations can scale. One would hope that if a number of separate grass-roots campaigns developed around the country, that they would eventually find one another, link up, and form a national organisation. Equally, if similar national organisations existed around Europe or around the world, one would expect them to create an umbrella organisation. The problem with campaigns that scale like this is that they generally have to trade off an element of interactivity and vibrancy for a degree of accountability. The early members who ran a small campaign with little hierarchy will find that they are now involved in something far more 'top-down'. Using the internet may be helpful here:

- **Where there are obstacles to a campaign scaling** – e.g. affiliates or members are very geographically scattered.
- **Where the mainstream media are not very responsive** – e.g. the fuel protests were not taken seriously by the press until after it had already scaled up.
- **Where a campaign wants to scale very quickly, often for a short time** – e.g. a 'flash protest' where protests come out of nowhere, then disappear again.

In summary, the internet's role in civil society tends to be as follows. Fragmented and scattered groups with quite specific shared interests can use the internet to find one another, then to coordinate their activities (including meeting face-to-face). In certain circumstances, a viral effect can occur, whereby the number of people involved grows very fast, but lessons indicate that this tends to work best as a short sharp public campaign, on one quite narrow issue (e.g. Jubilee 2000). There is less evidence to suggest that net-based associations can sustain themselves for long periods of time without becoming more like traditional institutions. Moreover, there is little evidence that net-based associations have discovered a legitimate means of converting themselves to traditional institutions.

Lessons for trade unions

Historically, trade unions have had to be highly formalised membership organisations, and strongly top-down. This has been a necessary way of achieving their goals over the years. As a result, they have an impressive record of longevity, and current membership levels are historically speaking very good. However, now that the wage premium of being a trade union member has all but disappeared, and cultural identification with the labour movement may be waning slightly, some unions are looking for more fluid models of organisation and membership, especially as they struggle to attract young workers. There are two ways in which net-based forms of membership may affect the trade union movement.

- Organising the bottom-up

Firstly, the internet offers the opportunity to formalise very informal types of association. Examples of this include the creation of a public, online presence for an amateur sports league, which otherwise would be only word-of-mouth. Equally, social networks can codify or formalise themselves, once they move online. For instance, a 'buddy list' on Instant Messenger or a cell phone address book create a black and white distinction between who is a friend and who isn't.

The equivalent for trade unions is what Richard Freeman has termed 'Open Source Unionism'.^{viii} Freeman uses examples of organising strategies like Alliance@IBM in Seattle which emerged from the bottom-up using email lists, then connected to the Communication Workers of America once it had achieved a certain scale. The scalability of the internet, and the fact that there is zero marginal cost of increasing that scale, meant that a message could be distributed around workers quickly and cheaply, without a more formal organising strategy.

Such forms of mobilisation are very popular amongst internet enthusiasts, who like to believe that purely 'self-organising systems' can become possible. Analogies to biological systems are used, although these have severe short-



comings.^{ix} One problem with this form of organisation and membership is that it can become imbued with a libertarian ideology that is resistant to more formal membership – for instance, paying a membership fee. The internet has long been the home of quite individualistic social philosophies, as explored by Paulina Borsook in *Cyberselfish*.^x A further problem is that distributed networks may become more visible thanks to new media, but there is little evidence as yet that they can become more coherent, or attain consensus. The risk is that affiliates simply exit as soon as the network no longer represents them.

-Disorganising the top-down

The second possibility for trade unions is a gradual deformalisation of membership, at least on the margins. The internet offers unions the opportunity to spread their message at zero marginal cost, and there is no reason why they can't provide accurate, useful information to workers in general, rather than just members. They can win support in civil society through becoming more porous, and 'leaky' with their information, both to attract members, and to disseminate their message in the mainstream media.

The advantage of this is that it doesn't necessarily undermine the historic advantages of unions as institutions. They retain their physical presence and face-to-face networks, but they add to that a more viral, decentralised way of distributing information. They become a broad campaign for better work, in addition to being a mandatory basis for voice in the workplace. I argue that the key benefit offered by the internet is to release the ethos of unionism into the grass roots, rather than to replace unionism with bottom-up, incoherent angst.

Conclusion

One of the central questions hanging over the internet, as a feature of civil society, is whether the technology can ever enable groups to complete the shift from networks to institutions. Can networks ever reach a level of political organisation where they can take decisions, to represent themselves with one voice? To date, the internet's main success stories in civil society have been in coordinating people who *don't want* to speak with one voice, but nevertheless will all benefit from the public profile that a large social movement can attain.

For this reason, trade unions should be wary of embracing a highly decentralised social model. But that doesn't mean that a decentralised technology can't be of use in specific situations. The social function of the internet is to help people find and locate those with over-lapping interests, and to enable them to interact with one another within the specific limits outlined earlier. Except in quite rare cases, this must usually be accompanied by periodic face-to-face contact for whatever reason. It is up to trade unions to work out how these technological capabilities can best be channelled towards their interests and their members' interests.

End Notes

-
- ⁱ R. Putnam (2000), *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster.
- ⁱⁱ R. Putnam (1995), Tuning in tuning out: the strange disappearance of social capital in America, *Political Science and Politics*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ P. Hall, (1999). Social Capital in Britain. *British Journal of Politics*, Vol 29, pp417-461.
- ^{iv} Rafael Gomez, 'Unions, Youth and the incumbency effect' in Centre for Economic Performance (2003) *Future of Unions in Modern Britain: Mid-term Report on Leverhulme Trust-Funded Research Programme 2000-2002*.
- ^v R. Kraut et al (1998) 'The Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being', *American Psychologist* September 1998, Vol. 53, No. 9, 1017–1031
- ^{vi} For a network analysis of this, see V. Krebs (2001) 'Unclouking Terrorist Networks', *First Monday* http://www.firstmonday.dk/issues/issue7_4/krebs/
- ^{vii} N Donovan et al (2002) 'Geographic Mobility', Performance and Innovation Unit
- ^{viii} R. Freeman & J. Rogers (2002) 'Open Source Unionism: Beyond Exclusive Collective Bargaining' in *WorkingUSA*, vol. 5, no. 4, Spring 2002.
- ^{ix} W. Davies (2003), 'Army Ants', *Spiked Online*, September 23rd 2003 <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/0000006DF2D.htm>
- ^x P. Borsook (1996), *Cyberselfish: A Cirtical Romp through the Terribly Libertarian Culture of High Tech*, Public Affairs.

About the author

William Davies is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research. In his previous job as researcher at The Work Foundation, he authored two reports looking at the internet, social capital and communities. *You Don't Know Me, But...: Social Capital and Social Software* and *Proxicomunication: ICT and the Local Public Realm*, both of which are available as free pdfs at www.theworkfoundation.com/research/isociety