

# Unions, social media and young workers - evidence from the UK

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## Unions, social media and young workers - evidence from the UK

### Abstract:

This paper explores the way in which the youth sections of three British unions use social media. We contribute to both the literature on unions and young workers, and union engagement with social media by providing the first systematic examinations of union youth sections' social media usage in terms of method, scope and content. The paper examines differences in Twitter usage between the youth sections of GMB, PCS and Unite over a two-year period from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014 - 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016. The paper considers the extent to which these union accounts fully utilise the interactive capabilities of social media, and whether the content of messages is specifically targeted towards young workers. We find similarities between the three accounts in terms of message content and focus, and that the youth sections of unions are more involved with the interactive capabilities of Web 2.0 than the existing literature suggests.

### Keywords:

Trade unions; young workers; social media; union renewal; union communications; Twitter; Web 2.0

## Introduction

This paper explores the way in which the youth sections of three British unions use social media. A complex relationship exists between young workers and unions, with the extant literature suggesting that whilst young workers are not against unionisation, membership amongst this age group is particularly low (Hodder and Kretsos, 2015). Much has been written about the potential for unions to embrace the Internet (Greene et al., 2003; Martinez Lucio and Walker, 2005) and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (Bryson et al., 2010; Panogiotopolus and Barnett, 2015) to engage young workers and improve levels of organisation and activism. It has been suggested that these new technologies are 'changing the face of community engagement because of their ability to recruit people to causes, organize collective action, raise awareness, influence attitudes, raise funds, and communicate with decision-makers' (McAllister, 2013: 93).

Young people in particular have high levels of engagement with social media. In January 2018, 88% of Internet users aged 18-29 years were using at least one social media platform (Pew Internet Research, 2018). The use of social media by unions is pertinent to young workers as it has been argued that unions 'need to adopt the communication technologies used by young people' (Bailey et al, 2010: 57), with Hodder and Houghton (2015) urging future research into this area. However, what is lacking from the research is a discussion of how and for what, different unions use social media.

In this paper, we contribute to both the literature on unions and young workers, and union engagement with social media. In doing so, we revisit and re-examine previous debates about union democracy. To do this, we provide the first systematic examinations of union youth sections' social media usage in terms of method, scope and content. The paper examines differences in Twitter usage between the youth sections of GMB, PCS and Unite over a two-year period from 1<sup>st</sup> June 2014 - 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016. The paper considers the extent to which these union accounts fully utilise the interactive capabilities of social media, and whether the content of messages is specifically targeted towards young workers. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section provides an overview of the existing literature on unions and young workers, before the methods are outlined in section three. Section four discusses our findings and explicates the similarities and differences between the ways in which the three unions use Twitter. The final section concludes the paper.

### Review of the literature

Following a substantial period of union decline throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, trade unions began to reassess their agendas in order to survive. Central to the union renewal agenda has been the need for unions to increase their appeal to under-represented groups, including young workers (Murray, 2017). The reasons for low levels of unionisation among young workers have been debated in the existing literature (see Waddington and Kerr, 2002 and Hodder and Kretsos, 2015 for a detailed discussion). Unions have long been criticised for not being appealing to younger workers but since the turn to

organising, there has been evidence in the UK and beyond of union initiatives to alter this (Cha et al, 2018; Simms et al, 2018). Improving the image of unions has been central to these initiatives in order to create an agenda to which young people can relate (Serrao Pascual and Waddington, 2000). Unions have attempted to improve their visibility and relevance to the younger generation, who are often found to have limited knowledge of unions, and potentially be malleable to joining unions if they were to be made aware of their existence and purpose (Freeman and Diamond, 2003; Gomez et al, 2002). However, it should be noted that some have cautioned against some union approaches that may pigeon-hole or patronise young workers (Dufour-Poirier and Laroche, 2015; Hodder et al, 2018), advocating instead for organising workers as workers, rather than specifically young workers (Simms, 2012: 113).

There have been several union attempts to change their image amongst young people and the wider public through greater utilisation of their 'communicative power' - increasing their presence on the Internet and social media (Geelan, 2015). The early literature on unions and the Internet (Web 1.0) focused on whether unions would be able to utilise the Internet as a 'radicalising and mobilising force, extending participation and eroding barriers to activism' (Saundry et al, 2007: 181). It was proposed that this could be achieved through a 'distributed discourse' – the reimagining of union democracy to reduce or even remove the bureaucratic barriers said to exist between a union's leadership and ordinary members (Grieco, 2002; Carter et al, 2003; Greene et al, 2003; Hogan et al, 2010).

Having evaluated union activity online in a number of different case studies, Greene and Kirton (2003: 331) argued that the Internet had the potential to reinvigorate unionism through ‘the creation of new channels of communication and new opportunities to participate—particularly for women members’. These new *safe spaces* would enable democratic discussion free from interference, aided by more readily available internal union information: ‘At the touch of a button, the individual union member can potentially access and marshal a range of relevant industrial relations materials which would have been almost impossible for the individual citizen to identify and collect together in the past’ (Greene et al, 2003: 284). Around the same time, Freeman (2004) and Freeman and Rodgers (2002) were encouraging a form of ‘open source unionism’, noting that ‘the Internet offers a near zero marginal cost technology for providing information to workers, for interactive communication with them, and for pressuring management on their behalf’ (Freeman, 2004: 6). Such suggestions have however been criticised for being overly optimistic with regards to the potential for the Internet to spark renewal and revitalization (Upchurch, 2014; Taylor and Moore, 2019: 47), and for considering unions to be ‘unified and consistent entities vis-à-vis the challenge of the “new”’ (Martinez Lucio, 2003: 337).

In contrast to this, other writers were less optimistic, citing the need to avoid the binary contrast between “bureaucracy” and the “internet” (Martinez Lucio, 2003:338), calling for a more nuanced understanding of union communications online (Martinez Lucio and Walker, 2005; Martinez Lucio et al, 2009). This requires acknowledgement of the political dimension of

unionism as 'as well as opening up new communication spaces, the Internet can be used by pre-existing technological and organisational elites both within and beyond leadership structures to close down or restrict discussions' (Martinez Lucio et al, 2009: 117). Trade union identity is crucial here. Union websites tend to portray a union's identity outward in a singular image, as this is considered to be the 'prominent public shop-window of the organization' (Bibby in Freeman, 2005: 167). However, caution is required as this often does not reflect the more complex realities concerning union identity, ideology and purpose (Hodder and Edwards, 2015). Indeed, 'the Internet does not have a single, simple effect on leadership-activist relations or leadership-membership relations. It has consequences both "horizontally" within both activist and organisational levels, as well as "vertically" between them' (Martinez Lucio et al, 2009: 117).

This debate has all but been left behind as 'the functions of Web 1.0 evolved from a static informational portal to one marked by the explosion of user-generated and interactive content' (Geelan and Hodder, 2017: 347; see also Hodder and Houghton, 2015: 175). As the transition was made from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, the function and use of the web fundamentally shifted. Web 2.0 centres on the ability of users to engage in one-to-one, one-to-many and many-to-many communication, with Web 2.0 platforms designed to facilitate such interaction, drive critical mass, and open accessibility to a wider range of users, both public and private, with relative transparency and global reach (Shirky, 2011). Social media platforms have transitioned from desktop to mobile devices, making them easily, readily and almost permanently

accessible to a multitude of different users (Hodder and Houghton, 2015). With influential and frequent users playing a critical role in deciding what content becomes popular (Fuchs, 2014) - directly or indirectly through algorithms - it is critical for unions to assess whether such mechanisms can facilitate the widespread, transparent and key communication upon which they survive and potentially thrive.

Despite early levels of optimism about the potential for the Internet to enhance renewal, coupled with the turn to organising among British unions, unions are still faced with few activists compared to members (Simms et al, 2019). Attempts at improving levels of democracy generally, and specifically among under-represented groups in unions have taken place largely without the explicit or specific reliance on the Internet and social media platforms. Perhaps not surprisingly then, there is limited literature that critically examines trade unions and social media. The work of Panagiotopoulos (2012) and Panagiotopoulos and Barnett (2015) offer useful insights into the views of union members and officials towards union adoption of social media platforms, suggesting that younger people are more likely to engage with unions on social media and could be recruited online (Panagiotopoulos, 2012: 186). Thornwaite et al (2018) surveyed union members about their experiences with social media to investigate the impact of gender on social media use, and found that women were just as likely, if not more likely, to engage with their union on social media. In their study of online freelancers, Wood et al (2018) found that social media groups played a central role in communication where traditional unions are absent, highlighting the



importance of Internet based communities for workers. Similarly, in the Chinese context, Quan (2017: 194-195) identified the role the Internet has played in coordinating strike action.

Whilst this is undoubtedly important, Upchurch and Grassman (2016) raise the issue of how employers are able to use union activity on social media to discipline employees, which may in turn prevent people from engaging with unions on social media platforms. The issue of surveillance through the Internet however is not new. Findlay and McKinlay (2003) noted the potential dangers for employers to obtain access to union information and resource, although their conclusions suggest the likelihood of such action was limited due to a combination of organisational resources and legal constraints. However, as we have moved into the Web 2.0 era, employer countermobilisation is even more of an issue (Thompson et al, 2019) and there have been warnings that ‘management could invade [a] supposed “safe space” and exploit... [union] participation as part of its counter-offensive’ (Taylor and Moore, 2019: 48). Surveillance and monitoring at the recruitment stage is also a concern for employees (Hurrell et al, 2017), and the development of the Internet and its internal politics still remains important in the context of social media companies in an era of communicative capitalism (Martinez Lucio, 2003: 338; Dean, 2009).

In spite of these concerns about discipline and surveillance, very few studies have looked at the ways in which unions actually use social media. Fowler and Hagar (2013) analysed Facebook and Twitter posts of Canadian unions

to evaluate the extent to which they related to federal and provincial elections. Whilst this is a useful contribution to the debate, it does not provide any indication to the types of messages posted by unions, other than their links to wider political elections. Panagiotopoulos (2015) undertook structural analysis, keyword frequency analysis and network analysis of a large data set of tweets from British trade unions, and Chivers et al (2017) provide a limited analysis into the behaviour of British unions on Twitter at a macro level. However, insights from these authors are limited in the application of the findings to union engagement with young workers through social media.

Only Hodder and Houghton (2015) and Frangi et al (2019) have analysed the content of union posts on social media. Despite the potential for Web 2.0 to free unions of the constraints they faced with Web 1.0 (Martinez Lucio, 2003; Bergman, 2016), Hodder and Houghton (2015) found that message content was predominantly used akin to an online noticeboard and that the union did not fully utilise the interactive capabilities available through Web 2.0 technologies. In a similar study, Geelan and Hodder (2017) also found limited user interaction and engagement when analysing Union Solidarity International's use of Twitter. Frangi et al (2019) undertook a mixed methods analysis of the Fight for \$15 movement in the USA considering the extent to which unions were able to use social media to become opinion leaders.

However, these studies have notable limitations. Hodder and Houghton's (2015) examination of union use of social media is limited to a single case across a short, four month period and cannot be extrapolated to wider union

behaviour. More critically, Hodder and Houghton captured in their data a period of strike action, which may call into question the extent to which their data represents typical union communication through social media. Whilst Geelan and Hodder (2017) extended analysis to compare Internet and social media usage, it should be noted that Union Solidarity International is not a union and takes the debate in a different direction. Similarly, Frangi et al's (2019) study considered union action alongside other civil society organisations and political groups, but both articles confirmed the static one-way nature of communications found in Hodder and Houghton (2015). Thus, further research is required to develop this area of enquiry, specifically to ascertain the extent to which unions engage with young workers across a longer time-period.

From the above, we can see little is known about the ways in which British unions engage with social media platforms. This is in spite of several studies suggesting that unions would be able to attract more young members if they were to specifically target them on social media (Bailey et al, 2010; Panagiotopoulos, 2012), and recent evidence of workers successfully organising using digital technologies (Nowak and Hodder, 2019: 274-275). However, as noted by Simms et al (2019: 338), 'Union leaders need to fully understand the scope of what digital can offer, and also to recognise its limitations', particularly with regards to the prospect of organising young people (see also Wright et al, 2019: 320-321). Assumptions that young people will automatically like or follow unions on social media are misguided (Hodder, 2015: 172-173), and across the union movement, 'there needs to be a

significant investment in digital skills and capacity, and an understanding that it is only an additional tool and it is not a replacement for face-to-face organising with members' (Simms et al, 2019: 338). This latter point is further emphasised in the context of the recent shift of young people using messenger apps (e.g. WhatsApp) over platforms like Facebook (Richards, 2015). Should unions wish to begin conversations with workers through interactive platforms that require prior, established connections, initial face to face contact between the union and the workers are needed. Despite these issues being raised, as yet there is no research on union use of social media to engage with young workers. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What are union youth sections saying on social media?
- 2) To what extent do unions focus their social media content on general or youth specific issues?
- 3) Are the interactive benefits of Web 2.0 fully utilised by youth sections of trade unions?

## Methods

To address the above research questions, Twitter was used to 'scrape' (actively identify, collect and store all available tweets from a given account) union accounts to collect tweets posted by unions to their social media audience(s). The Twitter accounts of GMB Young Members, PCS Young Members and Unite Young Members were collected over a 2 year period (1<sup>st</sup> June 2014 – 31<sup>st</sup> May 2016). Twitter was selected as the platform for

investigation as it is a publicly accessible resource for anybody with an Internet connection, whereby organisations and individuals can connect publicly, freely and easily. A total of 1,804 tweets were collected using CrowdTangle, a browser-based application with access to a database of all tweets from any given publicly visible Twitter account.

Table 1 shows a breakdown of tweets from each of GMB ( $n=937$ ), PCS ( $n=371$ ) and Unite ( $n=496$ ) young members' Twitter accounts for each of the two 12 month periods investigated. The table shows the number of followers each account had (those who have selected to connect and receive updates from the account), the number of other Twitter users that the union account was following, the number of retweets each post received, and the number of likes.

The tweets also contain a number of hashtags, a function that allows users 'to link a tweet to a particular topic, effectively a "bottom-up" curation of tweets around a particular topic into a single stream of data' (Tinati et al., 2014: 668). For example, users inserting "#today" into their tweet will see their tweets grouped and traversable when users search for "#today". A python script was compiled to identify in each tweet any hashtags used, to isolate the hashtag(s) and count the number of occurrences for each unique hashtag across the data file for each union, for each year (see Table 7).

**\*\* Table 1 about here \*\***

To the extent that Twitter's streaming Application Programming Interface (API) allows, the tweets collected represent a census of the time periods investigated as each tweet that was posted during these periods by the union account was collected. However, of total tweets posted by each account in its complete history, these two time periods represented a sample, given in Table 1. Our sample sizes show that as of the end of data collection, we collected over a quarter of *all* PCS tweets, almost two thirds of *all* GMB tweets and over three quarters of *all* Unite tweets, suggesting that our findings are representative of the behaviour of each union account analysed.

It should be noted, that when analyzing the tweets herein, the full content of each tweet was used. However, as the tweets analysed are accessible to anybody with a connection to the Internet, any quotations given as evidence to support our claims would typically mean the user can be identified by means of simple data aggregation. Therefore, we only provide direct quotations from users who arguably expect, and likely desire, their posts to be public (i.e. politicians, unions, newspapers, journalists). The posts by individual users, even if representing a union or organisation in some way, are included in analyses but any quotations are masked by precluding the username and paraphrasing the tweet contents. We acknowledge the limitation of such an approach in providing evidence, but (as per Hodder and Houghton, 2015) do so to maintain the anonymity and privacy of individuals.

Although our last data point occurs in 2016, we do not anticipate the use of Twitter by union youth sections to have fundamentally changed. However, we

note here that a shift towards other social media platforms by young people may bring about fundamentally different ways of communicating. A number of accounts (e.g. Olson, 2013; Richards, 2015; Moreau, 2019) have demonstrated that young people are moving away from public, 'one fits all' social media platforms, and towards closed messenger apps with friends, private (cf. public) Instagram accounts with friends, and live video streaming, or blogging, through messenger apps like SnapChat. As such, this trend may bring a different dynamic with young people's engagement for unions, one that requires alternative media. However, Twitter remains a fundamental tool in the public distribution and engagement of popular topics around work. To engage with young workers through messenger apps requires those young workers to already be aware of what unions are and be engaging with them online.

### *Analysis*

Tweets from each union for the 2 year period were cleaned to remove any data artefacts caused by incompatible text-coding systems (e.g. from DOS-based ASCII to Unix, and vice versa), and tweets were identified as being either *original* – a post originally created by the examined account - or a *retweet* – a post created by another Twitter user and re-posted by the examined account (see Table 2 for details). Tweets from each union were then collated for coding by the authors until 100% agreement was reached. Coding was initiated with a prescriptive framework (following Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Geelan and Hodder, 2017) that evolved throughout the coding process, resulting in eleven categories.

The eleven categories included: *Recruitment*, tweets that encouraged users to join the union; *Campaigning*, tweets that promoted awareness of the union's campaign activities; *External Campaigning*, tweets that promoted awareness of campaign activities of the wider trade union movement; *Strike Building*, tweets that encouraged participation in industrial action; *Strike Action*, tweets that evidenced industrial action; *Solidarity*, tweets that displayed solidarity to and from the union of interest; *Engagement*, tweets that demonstrated interaction between the union of interest and other users; *News*, tweets reporting news relevant to the union and wider relevant issues; and *Other*, which contained all other tweets. As part of the evolution through which the data and categories went, and expanding those of Hodder and Houghton (2015), it was evident that two further categories were necessary. *Democracy*, which represented tweets relating to democratic union events, such as national union conferences; and *Youth Forum/Conference*, which collated tweets that were directly related to such events or to topics discussed during these events. All tweets were further coded as to whether the message was youth specific – i.e. aimed at young people – or more generally applicable to union audiences and the wider public. Table 3 shows the tweet categories for each account, and Table 4 displays the number of youth specific tweets for each account.

\*\* Table 2 about here \*\*

## Findings



Table 2 shows that each union youth section increased the overall frequency at which they posted tweets between 2014-15 and 2015-2016 (Chi-Sq=108.521, df=2,  $p<.001$ ). GMB posted 465 more tweets in the second year than the first ( $p<.05$ ), PCS posted 17 more ( $p<.05$ ), and Unite posted 4 more ( $p<.05$ ). Collapsed by tweet type, differences in the number of *Original* tweets posted across the three unions between 2015-16 and 2014-15 were significant (Chi-Sq = 142.297, df=2,  $p<.001$ ). However, GMB were the only union to increase the number of *original* tweets in 2015-16 ( $p<.05$ ), whereas PCS and Unite posted significantly fewer *original* tweets in the second year ( $p$ 's<.05). All three unions posted significantly more *retweets* in 2015-16 than in 2014-15 (Chi-Sq = 27.674, df=2,  $p<.001$ ), with differences between each year for each union significant to a 95% confidence interval. The data also show that GMB increased their Twitter activity the most of the three unions in 2015-16, and this pattern for GMB was consistent across the different tweet types.

The use of retweets is to engage further with their intended audience(s) by identifying posts and signalling recognition with a retweet. Upon investigating the data, it is evident that the use of retweets was for both wider engagement, and to identify posts of relevance to the broader union movement. That is, retweets were not used to signal their own cause alone, but that of other unions and campaigns of interest. For example, the GMB Younger Members account retweeted the following, “@TUCYoungWorkers: How are you? - a mental health at work guide for young workers. <http://bit.ly/wmhd15>:=<https://www.tuc.org.uk/about-tuc/young-workers/mental->

health-work-young-workers%E2%80%99-guide

#WMHD

<http://t.co/uYGInTe3tv>:=<https://twitter.com/TUCYoungWorkers/status/652842045954854913/photo/1>'.

Table 3 shows that for each union, the categories of Campaigning, External Campaigning and News were the most frequent tweet types in each year, with the exception of Other tweets and a few tweets generated by PCS during a minimal period of industrial action in 2014-15. Examples of these categories include *"So many actions taking place today by Unite young & community members against @SportsDirectUK keep following at #SportsDirectShame"* (Campaigning; Unite), *"#GMB Young Members from @GMBWestMidlands showing their #Pride. #BirminghamPride"* (External Campaigning; GMB) and *"@David\_Cameron's 'Help to Save' plan another example of how completely out of touch this government is with Britain"* (News; GMB).

The categories of Recruitment (e.g. *"Recently joined the #Labour party & not yet in a Union? Join here 2day <http://www.gmbbyorkshire.org.uk> and collectively we'll fight 4 change! #GMB"* (GMB)), Strike Building (e.g. *"RT @PCS\_Scotland: BREAKING NEWS: PCS Scottish museum members escalate strike over removal of pay allowance, 6 weekends from Easter"* (PCS)), Strike Action (e.g. *"On my way to the picket. Solidarity to my brothers & sister, friends & comrades braving the rain, on strike today. @pcs\_union @PCSYMN #O15"* (PCS)) and Solidarity (e.g. *"Solidarity from the @PCSYMN to all those marching on the @pplsassembly demo in London today. The only*

*way to beat austerity is to fight!*" (PCS)) were used predominantly less than Campaigning, External Campaigning and News.

Further examples are provided for tweets in the categories of Engagement (e.g. *"Don't forget to vote! Say yes to renew political fund so we can put politicians under pressure whatever their party"* (PCS), Democracy (e.g. *"Voting rights include Executive Council, Regional Committees and Political Committees. #progressive"* (Unite)), and Youth Forum/Conference (e.g. *"Young trade unionists at @unionstogether political school hearing about the organisation and Young Labour! #YL16"* (GMB)).

**\*\* Table 3 about here \*\***

Throughout the period of data collection, there were two national young worker months (in November of each year), as well as annual youth conferences for each union. It was evident that during each of these events, unions engaged in an increased level of Twitter activity, posting information about the event, updates throughout each event, and information following the event, which is reflected in the Youth Forum/Conference category. Each union demonstrated a marked percentage of tweets relevant to their conferences each year. Indeed 18.46% of all tweets relate to this category.

Despite this, across all categories, GMB and Unite reduced their focus on tweets for a youth audience, with a decrease of 5.52 percentage points and 37.52 percentage points, respectively (see Table 4). However, the tweets

from the PCS account shifted from a more general focus to targeting youth audiences with an increase in youth specific tweets of 13.82 percentage points of all tweets. Table 4 shows more detail as to the number and percentage of youth specific tweets for each union account per year.

**\*\* Table 4 about here \*\***

Indicators of engagement generated by each union, retweets and 'likes', were also collected and the number of tweets that received more than 5 retweets and 'likes' are shown in Table 5, alongside an example tweet that received the greatest overall engagement for each account. The most engaged tweet for each union focused specifically on promoting their own ongoing campaigns and the unions arguably attempted to use their twitter accounts to generate wider engagement with the campaigns. It is also evident that the level of engagement with Twitter users dramatically increased in 2015-16 compared with 2014-15 for each union for both number of 'likes' and number of retweets, again suggesting a more thorough and integrated campaign with wider audiences and a greater level of activity overall. Thus overall, we found that union youth sections were generating a greater degree of initial activity, a wider and more diversified engagement pattern and a greater level of engagement with their audiences in 2015-16 than in 2014-15.

**\*\* Table 5 about here \*\***

The use of Twitter extends to mentioning other users, either to communicate publicly with them directly, to mention them in a public post more generally, or in conversation with a wider group of users. Mentions, therefore, arguably demonstrate the reach, engagement and critical mass of a Twitter account, at least from the perspective of engagement (whereas follower numbers may not necessarily demonstrate engagement). As Table 5 shows, an overall increase in engagement, we further analysed the tweets to identify the number of occasions union accounts mentioned other users, as well as the number of unique user accounts, the latter demonstrating the extent to which a union is directly engaging with a diverse audience cf. engaging often with only a few users. Table 6 details the union youth sections interaction with other Twitter users.

\*\* Table 6 about here \*\*

Although only GMB increased their overall activity with regard to user mentions, both GMB and PCS increased the number of *unique* Twitter accounts with whom they engaged. This indicates that while GMB substantially increased their engagement with a more diverse network of users in 2015-16 compared with 2014-15, PCS increased their diversity, but interacted with this more diverse audience on fewer occasions. Unite, on the other hand, engaged with far fewer unique user accounts in 2015-16 than they did in 2014-15, and also engaged less frequently with others users in general. Looking at the data across the two years, we can see that GMB is by far the most productive in terms of conversation with other users.

As shown in Table 7, each union used a greater number of hashtags in total and a greater number of unique hashtags in 2015-16 than in 2014-15. This suggests that each union became more varied in the topics with which they were engaging, but also a potential diversifying of intended target audience for their messages. This is in line with GMB and Unite shifting focus away from youth specific tweets to those for a wider audience (see Table 4). When looking at the most used hashtags by each union, the data suggest Unite also focused their hashtags on youth events in 2014-15, but in 2015-16 shifted towards wider industrial campaigns, e.g. #sportsdirectshame). However, PCS saw a shift in the opposite direction, from wider campaigns, e.g. #weallneedapayrise, to youth focused events e.g. #pcsyms15.

\*\* Table 7 about here \*\*

If we compare the hashtag and engagement data (Tables 6 and 7, respectively), it is evident that in the second year GMB substantially increased their engagement and overall Twitter activity compared with the year before. However, Unite's pattern of activity is less obvious. While they were reasonably active in using hashtags and generating likes and retweets from their content, their use of conversation to engage an audience was somewhat stifled.

Although these results look encouraging for GMB, and suggest PCS and Unite could improve their conversational activity to increase engagement

further, if we assess the number of unique accounts mentioned by each union as a proportion of their overall original tweets, we see a different story (see Table 8). As GMB increased their original tweet activity substantially in 2015-16, they did not increase their conversational audience diversity concomitantly. However, across the two years, GMB had the greatest overall original tweet activity and were engaging with a unique member account 47% of the time. Similarly, while the figures are approximately the same for any one year for PCS and Unite (ca. 40-45%), across the two years it is evident that their diverse network engagement was utilised as a significantly smaller percentage of their original tweet activity, although they did each increase this ratio in 2015-16 compared with 2014-15.

**\*\* Table 8 about here \*\***

However, it is worth noting that while the number of unique accounts may indicate the degree of diversity in the union's conversational engagement, many of the unique accounts were either union branch accounts, or union representatives. For example, the top three mentioned accounts for GMB in both 2014-15 and 2015-16 were either a branch, associated account or union representative. A similar pattern is observed for all but one of the PCS top three unique account mentions (see Table 6).

### Discussion and conclusion

This paper makes a substantial contribution to the burgeoning literature on union use of social media through examining the content of messages sent by

three union youth sections on Twitter over a two year period. In doing so, it also makes a clear contribution to the literature on young workers and trade unions. We now address each of the research questions in turn.

In answering our first research question, we see that overall, similar content is posted by each of the three union youth sections. Content posted to Twitter most frequently contained elements of Campaigning, External Campaigning and News, with a similar pattern observed across the three different union youth sections (Table 3). PCS provided the exception during a small period of industrial action in 2014-15, but the general pattern persisted beyond this. Our findings mirror the limited previous research in the area (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Frangi et al, 2019), which has also identified the most frequent tweet types to be tweets relating to campaigning and provision of news information. Despite suggestions to the contrary (Panagiotopoulos, 2012; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015), we found that each of the accounts made limited attempts to use Twitter for recruitment.

Our findings support existing analysis of social media data (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Frangi et al, 2019) and related arguments put forward by young trade unionists that social media is not being used for recruitment as young people first have to know what a union is, second be aware of which union represents their industry, and third, look them up on social media. As many young people do not know what unions do, and are in fact 'blank slates' when it comes to understanding unionism (Freeman and Diamond, 2003), then those young people who already follow a union on social media are likely



to already be union members and activists (see also Hodder, 2015: 173). This will increasingly be an issue for unions as there are a number of shifts in the paradigm of Internet use by young people. Recent media accounts (e.g. Olson, 2013; Richards, 2015) have highlighted a shift by young people from more publicly visible communication platforms like Twitter and Facebook, towards private messenger apps (e.g. WhatsApp), and smaller closed group communication through a medium less likely to favourably distribute written union messages (e.g. private accounts on Instagram).

Turning to our second research question, the content of the tweets was not youth specific overall, despite being the accounts of the union youth sections. This is an important and positive finding as it shows that attempts to communicate the message of the youth section target their audience because they are workers, not specifically because they are young (Simms, 2012: 113). In doing so, it is clear that attempts are being made to avoid the 'ghettoising' (Dufour-Poirier and Laroche, 2015) of young workers that can often happen inside trade union youth structures when unions decide to increase communications with the younger generation. This is likely to have occurred in our data due to young trade unionists being in charge of the social media accounts, rather than more established trade unionists. Thus this finding contributes to the existing literature which examines how youth sections of unions attempt to engage with young workers by putting a youth focus on more general trade union issues (Hodder et al, 2018). That said, it is not clear from the analysis of our first research question that young workers

are the intended audience of the tweets. We would assume this to be the case but cannot say with absolute certainty.

Our third research question asked whether or not the unions in this study were using the full interactive capabilities of social media and enables us to contribute directly to the debate of whether or not the Internet (and by extension social media) is being used to enable a 'distributed discourse' between union members and activists (Carter et al, 2003; Greene et al, 2003). Social media generally, and Twitter more specifically, should enable a greater level of member-to-member and member-to-activist interaction (Wood et al, 2018), and a flattening of hierarchical structures. However, when considering calls for unions to use social media more interactively, it is important to remember that 'there is a limit on the amount of information activists can digest and process, and internet fatigue may be apparent' (Upchurch, 2014: 132) and there is also a danger of 'armchair activism' or 'clicktivism' (Geelan and Hodder, 2017: 261) rather than the generation of non-virtual action. It is also necessary to note that public social media platforms are limited in the extent to which they can offer *safe spaces* free from employer surveillance and countermobilisation (Taylor and Moore, 2019; Thompson et al 2019). Thus, young people may be reluctant to engage fully with work or union issues on social media platforms (Hurrell et al, 2017).

Existing research suggested that unions adopt a passive approach to utilising web 2.0 (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Frangi et al, 2019). Our findings here suggest youth sections of unions go beyond this passive engagement,

evolving to a more active approach (see Leek et al., 2017) in the second year of the investigated time period, demonstrating an increase in the use of likes, retweets, and hashtags. However, the degree to which web 2.0 can facilitate a richer interactive experience is under-utilised, with mentions and direct public conversations remaining stagnant. This finding is common across all three youth sections, despite potential differences in their identity and democratic structures and spaces created for young members (see Hodder et al, 2018).

Our data show that a number of Twitter conversations were somewhat dominated by a few figures. Unions remain unclear as to how to break beyond engaging with their existing activists, and one potential reason for this is the time it takes to utilise the Internet and social media properly – a problem that is not new. Writing about Web 1.0, Greene and Kirton (2003: 324) noted ‘to participate via the internet one still has to find the space and time’, and this is possibly even more of an issue in the social media era. While increased interaction helps to demonstrate activity in the main, a centric hub of individuals has its issues for distributed discourse, primarily in the lack of distribution. Although conversations on Twitter in general can be traced back to a number of key accounts (Bakshy et al., 2011), and relying on a small sample of influential accounts to ‘seed’ information can be beneficial in spreading word of mouth (see Kozinets et al., 2010), there may be detrimental effects. The individual’s voice does not necessarily represent the wider union, and so there are questions regarding the extent to which unions are able to become opinion leaders (Frangi et al, 2019). Therefore, while the literature suggests that social media can provide unions with a greater

opportunity to interact with members, activists and potential members (Panagiotopoulos, 2012; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015), our findings demonstrate that more is to be done in this regard for the full benefits of these technological platforms to be embraced, whilst also acknowledging that social media is no panacea for success.

This presents the harsh reality that while unions have a great opportunity in the use of social media to engage with new, young audience members, they are in reality heading further into the echo chamber (Clarke and van Slyke, 2010), with only those already active, becoming increasingly active, and the potential reach ultimately diminished. This can be seen further by considering the number of accounts the unions are following/being followed by (see Table 1). The follower numbers of each of the accounts are low, when compared to main union social media accounts, union membership levels and the number of young people that are union members (see Hodder, 2015: 173; Hodder and Houghton, 2015: 176), demonstrating that the number of people following union accounts has little resemblance to union membership figures.

Whilst this paper has expanded on the work of Hodder and Houghton (2015) and has deepened the understanding of union use of social media, a number of issues remain outstanding. For example, how do unions in different countries use social media? Studies to date have concentrated on Twitter - are different messages being posted on different social media platforms? What impact do private messenger apps such as WhatsApp have on union activity and organisation? To what extent are members and activists engaging

with centrally controlled union accounts on social media? Does this lead to the 'distributed discourse' as predicted early in the debate about unions and the Internet? What impact does a union's identity have on its Internet and social media presence? We present these questions to continue the research agenda, in order to build on the findings we have presented in this paper.

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