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# ***The Rhetoric and Realities of Internet Technologies on Trade Union Marketing, Communications, Resistance and Community***

**Stokes, P.; Jones, B. T.; Kline, H.**

## **Abstract**

The Internet and the many technologies it has generated (for example, social media) create varying impacts in specific sectors. Trades Unions (TUs) are a case in point and are significant longstanding institutions which have developed over a number of centuries in many different national contexts. While the Internet has been adopted by TUs they have also generally been cast in an idealised light as if the Web should automatically be expected to radically transform and improve processes, communities (Wenger, 1998) and relations. The paper challenges this *zeitgeist* and suggests that the predominant ‘utopian’-style idealistic presentation of TU and the web is the product of technological determinism (Dafoe, 2015). This has important implications for TUs ‘lived experiences’ (Van Manen, 2016) and *realpolitik*. There is a risk that technologies will continue to operate at a macro, rather than a micro individual level, and be more dominated by *managerial* and *commercial* motives which encroach on legitimate TU representation and resistance rather than TU interests.

**Key words:** Trade Unions, Internet, Web Communication, Resistance, Marketing, Managerialism.

## **Introduction**

This paper explores the manner in which the Internet, and the platform it represents for multiple technologies (for example, social media, Web 2.0, Web 3.0), connects with the activities and goals of Trade Unions (TU). TUs protect and advance member interests, and, negotiate with managerial and organizational representatives in a contemporary context characterised by increasing managerial and organizational power (sic: managerialism) and, certainly often in the UK context, weakening TU membership (Hodder et al, 2017). Interestingly, aligned with this, TUs are often considered as kindred domains of, or aligned with, particular political parties and their memberships. Indeed, *a priori*, it might be suggested that political parties, which conventionally have

highly sophisticated Internet and social media management, might provide valuable opportunities for TUs to learn valuable lessons. It is important to recognise at an early point in the argument that the TU world is a rich and varied one and it is not the purpose, or intention, of the present argument to summarise or provide a cross-cultural comparative. Rather the present paper drills down to a particular set of focal issues in the United Kingdom in a particular area of the service sector. However, it is important to signal that potential lessons may be available for wider contexts from the present research.

As alluded to above, the Internet is an umbrella term pointing at an amalgam of social media and applications including, for example, what are termed ‘Web 2.0’ and ‘Web 3.0’. Web 2.0 features and functions have been available for most of 21<sup>st</sup> century however Web 3.0, while not an entirely new generation of technology in itself, is emerging as a configuration of new patterns and ways of using the Internet sic: the World-Wide-Web (WWW). These new forms of usage include, by way of illustration, artificial intelligence, advancements in understanding semantic relationships and connections in data, machine learning and personalization (Tkach et al, 2017). While, in the earlier Web 1.0, a large number of websites and webpages provided content for the user to read and consume in a *passive* manner, Web 2.0 encourages and facilitates the user to *interact* with sites and other users connected with it. Furthermore, Web 3.0 holds the promise of an ever more connected, intelligent, smarter web of data, combined with personalized and customized services to users. Given the inexorable technological advances which are encountering intensifying 21<sup>st</sup> century labour relation dynamics this leads to the following research question:

What are the rhetoric and lived experiences of how a TU in the UK context engages with the Internet (and its related technologies Web 2.0 and Web 3.0) in attempts to build community and communicate with members (set against a backdrop of facilitating resistance to increasing management actions and power)?

The paper proceeds in the following manner. First, the paper considers the extant literature on the Internet (in particular relation to Web 2.0 and Web 3.0) and relates this to TUs. The argument then introduces the concept of technological determinism and

surfaces surrounding issues of managerial power and TU member resistance exploring the ‘lived experience’ of Internet technologies in quotidian workplace settings (Van Manen, 2016). The paper invokes the notion and conceptual framework of communities of practice in order to frame and contextualise the exploration. The argument then builds a methodology and a mini-case study in order to explore and exemplify these issues and presents insights and implications regarding alternative castings of the Internet in relation to TUs.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Internet, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0***

The Internet has become a self-evident and unavoidable part of modern life across many areas of the globe (Anderson, Steen and Stavropoulos, 2017; Snee, 2008; Minocha, 2009a; Minocha, 2009b; and Ashraf, 2009). The OECD (2007:5) indicated:

‘The creation of content by users is often perceived as having major social implications. The internet as a new creative outlet has altered the economics of information production and led to the democratisation of media production and changes in the nature of communication and social relationships (sometimes referred to as the “rise – or return – of the amateur”). Changes in the way users produce, distribute, access and re-use information, knowledge and entertainment potentially gives rise to increased user autonomy, increased participation and increased diversity. These may result in lower entry barriers, distribution costs and user costs and greater diversity of works as digital shelf space is almost limitless.’

Within the Internet, social media and technologies such as Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 have become recognised Internet-based tools with the potential to advance organizational goals. Web 2.0 can be understood as a collection of web-based interactive and user-generated applications that include, for example: blogs, podcasts, online conversations, social networking sites and other social media tools. (Allen, 2017; Liu-Thompkins and Rogerson, 2012) User-generated content (that is to say content created by the readers rather than the site owner or provider) implies communication is faster moving, more dynamic and democratic as opposed to being based on, for instance, traditional and hierarchical means of communication (i.e. fax, letter, telephone). Moreover, Internet technologies are now on the cusp of what has been termed Web 3.0 - the next generation of web technologies and social media. There is much controversy surrounding the term and a common understanding of Web 3.0 is still not agreed upon in the literature (Finch, 2018; O'Reilly, 2007; Spivak, 2007; Hendler, 2009):

‘Web 3.0 commenced around 2010 and [...] it involves: “Development of multi-platform communications and engagement approaches. Real-time

management decision making. Rapid business model innovation. Further disintermediation especially of ‘professionals’ as knowledge brokers. Move to a looser, less regulated, more flexible model relying on professional ethics rather than rules.’ (Smith and Harwood, 2011:4)

Clearly, innovations such as Web 3.0, building on Web 2.0 and wider applications, are intended to shift the locus of power and energy away from conventional hubs such as hierarchical pyramids, managerial tiers and organizational structures and more towards members, consumers and essentially individuals, small groups and communities (Alor-Hernández and Álvarez-Rodríguez, 2018). Overall, as a system and approach, in the specific case of Web 3.0 it tends to offer a less structured, more informal, bottom-up, membership form of communication which has nevertheless presents rhizomatic (i.e. metaphorically speaking ivy growth-like (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Pick, 2017)) structuring which has the potential to connect well with, and engender, myriad social and democratic practices. It should be noted that Web 1.0 represented an earlier chronological and technical stage of development. This comprised largely information screens which were essentially passive in nature. Moreover, early forms of email emerged in this period which has continued alongside the progressive development of subsequent Web developments. As such Web 3.0 represents a significant new evolution of the web (Markoff, 2006; Spival, 2017) with important implications for a majority of organizations including TUS and these are considered in the next section of the argument.

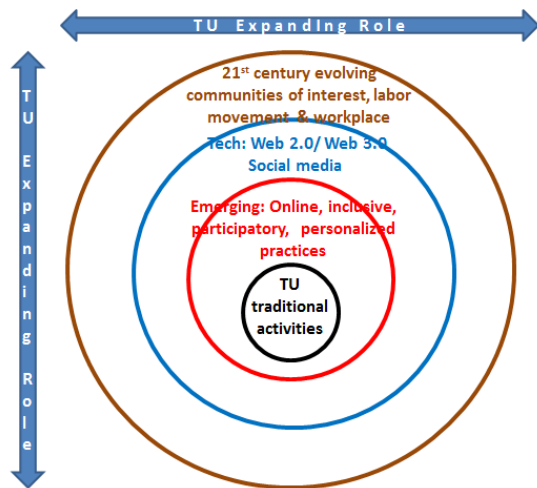
### ***The Potential Impact of Internet developments on TUs – moving from macro to micro-engagement***

The marketing of TUs, such as many organizations, encompasses a rich range of activities encompassing, *inter alia*: communication, organising meetings and rallies, representation/protest, branding and reputation development (Berthon et al, 2010; Cruz & Fill, 2008; Tuten & Solomon, 2017). Organizational employees along with their TU representatives can potentially employ the social web to achieve TU goals of educational empowerment and liberation (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010). It can serve, for example, as a peer and active-learning environment (i.e. one in which individuals dynamically exchange thoughts in near real-time conversations) to which

people across the social spectrum may contribute. Furthermore, contributors can potentially come from all levels of society and communities as well as from different employers and employment sectors and, thus, these transformations are potentially eclectic and democratic. The technologies provide scope for employees to raise issues for discussion outside of the workplace in a public forum (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Smith and Harwood, 2011). They also have the potential to offer peer support, on-line counselling and space to raise and address issues free from work pressures and managerial constraints. Thus, the Internet and its social media/Web 2.0/Web 3.0 technologies create and provide spaces in which, in principle, freedom of expression and communication, in all its guises, can potentially be progressed across organizational, national and international boundaries. Web 2.0 and the emergent Web 3.0 are thus prompting TUs to think about how their members research, engage, interact and connect within organization and with each other and therefore it raises important questions about how TUs organise, manage and communicate and indeed resist organization and management pressures (Fleming and Spicer, 2007; Bryson, Gomez and Willman, 2010; Fenton and Barassi, 2011; Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Panagiotopoulos, 2012; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2014).

There has been much academic policy and media debate about Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 (Beer, 2008; Beer and Burrow, 2007; Bradshaw, 2009; Cane, 2009; Castells, 2001; Fuchs, 2014; Edgar, 2009; Jones and Iredale, 2009; Keenan and Shiri, 2009; OECD, 2007; McAfee, 2009; Tench and Jones, 2015; Valor, 2009; Yu and Young, 2017). This debate has focused on a number of themes and issues including, for example, the impact on communication, and, corporate and small businesses reputations (Jones, Temperley and Lima, 2009; Jones, 2010) however there has been remarkably little academic comment on the impact Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 is having, or is likely to have, on TUs at the *micro or individual/small group level*. This is surprising given the potentially potent role that TUs continue to play in business relations and environments. In addition, TUs are facing substantial challenges regarding membership retention and heightened management power. Nevertheless, over time, TU's have successfully demonstrated their ability to adapt to the imperative of different epochs. Fig 1 below depicts TU's potentially expanding role and sphere of influence into Web usage and inclusive, participatory and personalized online practices:

Fig. 1 TU's expanding role and sphere of influence



Such transformations are not conducted in a vacuum and TUs and their various branch memberships thus constitute communities or Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998; McCormack et al, 2017). Wenger's theory of Communities of Practice points at processes and structures of learning and views learning as a participatory and interactive dynamic that translates the very environments in which it takes place (Wenger, 1998). There are three key elements that comprise Communities of Practice: *Domain*, *Community*, and, *Practice*. To summarise: 'Domain' implies more than group or network – it points at values such as interest, commitment and identity; 'Community' means that people have relationships with each other (however remote) but importantly they demonstrate caring and sharing; and, 'Practice' indicates: being practitioners together – building and doing and learning together in some form or way (Wenger and Tryner, 2018). Wenger and Wenger-Tryner (2018) point at how various sectors such as, for example, TU communities generate distinctive communities, domains and practices and it is evident that a tool such as the Web has a range of ways in which it might underpin such developments. Interestingly and importantly, however, they underline that: 'A website in itself is not a community of practice' (Wenger and Tryner, 2018:1). Clearly, in this regard, a range of different TU communities, based in varying national contexts and drawing on different traditions are interacting with Internet and web-based activities. The present paper focuses predominantly on the United Kingdom context but nevertheless seeks potentially to draw out insights which may have wider generalisability, pending future confirmatory research, across other countries and contexts.



The extant social media and TU literature has to-date tended to focus on how specific platforms or tools such as, for example, *Facebook*<sup>™</sup> (Bryson, Gomez and Willman, 2010; Gerbaudo, 2018) and *Twitter*<sup>™</sup> (Hodder and Houghton, 2015) have been used. Equally, some analysis has taken place through the lens of communication (Fenton and Barassi, 2011); or, for instance, as well as adopting a policy perspective (Smith and Holmes, 2011; Jokivuori, 2014). It provides space in which issues of TU relevance and interest can be explored, discussed and developed by a wide range of stakeholders in conjunction with ways in which TUs can employ social media/ Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 to market and communicate with their members. Of course, TUs working with Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 also can have societal and economic impacts and dimensions (OECD, 2007; Rudman and Bruwer, 2016; Tapscott and Williams, 2006; Toffler, 1984) and, relating this to TUs, can serve as a useful vehicle for promoting the concepts of freedom; democratic values, civic responsibility and can help to develop discussions on workers' rights and responsibilities and in building a sense of community at various levels, branch, region and national.

Moreover, in the face of increasing diversity and workforce heterogeneity, Web 3.0 is particularly well-suited to be a critical asset. One of the standout features of Web 3.0 is its ability to take into account diversity and individuality by drawing on, and integrating, individual context and linked content. Fred Wilson, an American venture capitalist and leading blogger, recognized early on that such “personalization” (Tkach, 2017) is a defining feature of Web 3.0 (or as Wilson terms it the “implicit web”):

“... the implicit web is all about the value that will accrue to an Internet user when their every action is tracked, recorded, and used to provide value back to that user. There is also a second order play when that clickstream activity is shared with the user's permission with everyone else.” (Wilson, 2007).

‘At its core, Web 3.0 applications use automated personalization and semantic analytics to filter mass amounts of data to generate its relevance-based content. Pertinent information is the goal: users quickly want content they can use. A filter would be based on personal needs, tastes, relationships, location and social currency. This is a radically different paradigm than the current Web 2.0

environment where user-driven, volume-heavy search leads to declining relevance as scale increases and tastes become more important.’ (Osak, 2011).

Speaking of Web 3.0, Ethan Beard, Facebook’s director of platform partnerships, asserts in a Knowledge@Wharton newsletter that: ‘a fundamental shift is taking place online, from an information-based web to the people’s web’. This transformation means that TUs themselves must begin to stop viewing themselves as central co-ordination agencies but rather conduits and facilitators through which myriad communications may pass in a more rhizomatic manner (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988; Kuronen and Huhtinen, 2017).

As an example of how personalization can inform TU activity, the argument provides an example discussed by Piller (2010). Piller relates his experience and research into *Sif*, a major Swedish white collar TU which merged with another TU called *HTF* and took the new name *Unionen*. For Piller, it was not surprising that TUs are increasingly interested in personalization and customized services that are highly individualized, particularly as decreasing union membership is a trend in western economies. According to Piller, there was a difference between mass customization of services and personalization:

“....mass customization is about changing, assembling and modifying product and service components to fit the user, while personalization is about intense communication and interaction between supplier and customer. (Piller, 2010)

Piller (2010) observed that from the unionists or members perspective, personalization means that:

- ‘The member indicates is/her areas of interest;
- The member gains access to specific information, activities, communities, etc. due to the indicated interest areas;
- The member can improve the usefulness of information and services offered through interactions, assessments, and idea generation.’

From the TUs perspective as an organization, personalization is:

- ‘A way of guiding members towards suitable services, in respect of both service area (e.g. insurances, advice on salaries, career profiles, etc.) and service type (“one size fits all”, “made- to- measure”, or “bespoke”)
- A means for collection of information to be used for further development of information, communication and services’

Overall, TU strategy for communications with its members can be described as personalization and relevance through:

- Multi-dimensional segmentation and
- Individual choice

Personalization thus provides multi-dimension segmentation and means that specific information, activities, web-based communities are offered according to profession/education (labourer, clerk, manager, engineer), industry sector (transport, media, chemicals and pharmaceuticals), and interest (e.g. gender equality, health, career development, discrimination, harassment). TUs, then, in personalizing their services and interactions for their constituents will need to be transparent in their approach, and acknowledge the importance of information sources, ownership and consent to use. Wider scenarios for the use of personalization using the web are mentioned in Richard Freeman’s paper on the Labour Market in the New Information Economy as early as 2002. (Freeman, 2002) In his paper, Freeman identifies five hypotheses for the potential use by trade unions of the web. One of which is the customized service hypothesis. Freeman invokes Roger Darlington to characterize it:

“The membership of trade unions will increasingly demand the levels of services which can only be provided by the...e-union...Our members will find that in dealing with other organizations they are given increasingly speedy and personalized service on a 24 – hour 7- day- a- week basis. They will expect no less from their trade union.” (Roger Darlington, Communication Workers Union, UK)

Freedman cites two real world implementations of personalization. Both are UNISON initiatives in the UK. [WWW.troubleatwork.org.uk](http://WWW.troubleatwork.org.uk) is a UNISON site formed in conjunction with the National Union of Students to provide personalized advice on work related problems for student workers. Topics include discrimination, contracts, issues around lifting heavy objects. The second site is UNISON-Direct which offers members who are experiencing workplace problems the ability to call a help line, 24 hours a day to receive customized information from its knowledge base and over 300 scripts. Thus, the Web can also be valuable in building worker solidarity and broaden, as well as deepen, understanding of work-related issues. A range of the potential benefits for TU use of Web (encompassing its various applications and manifestations) are shown below in Table 1.

<b>Web can:</b>
1. Serve as an additional channel of communication that facilitates new effective and efficient ways of communicating with union members
2. Allow members to bring issues to the union and promotes member involvement and participation
3. Improve equal opportunities for hard to reach members such as women (Beale, 1982) who may not have time to attend union meetings outside of office hours
4. Build relationships of trust and promotion of the democratic ideal as comment and discussion is open and conducted in a public forum
5. Serve as an additional tool for reaching out and recruiting new members and new demographics
6. Improve levels of service delivery, help deliver TU renewal and possibly help to halt decline in TU membership
7. Potentially enhance and enable better management of TU reputation and image
8. Be used as a new form, as well as a vehicle for social and industrial protest

9. Be used to mobilise and influence opinion, build resistance to and challenge managerial assumptions and worldviews
10. Serve as a new channel of distribution for information
11. Build international links, further partnerships and improve union brand image
12. Build education and training capability through peer support and mentoring within the sphere of the social web
13. Crowdsourcing (Howe, 2009) and serve as a market research tool that TUs can use to survey and gather ideas and data on the views and opinions of their members
14. Help TU members address issues around terms and conditions of employment such as pay and Health and Safety at work
15. Help democratise TU workplace communication

Table 1 – Benefits of Web (adapted from Jones, 2019)

Moreover, employees can use it to communicate and unite online to counter the isolating effects of an increasingly uncertain and insecure world of work (Hassard and Morris, 2018; Heery and Salmon, 2000). Furthermore, the tools of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 can be used to raise awareness of campaigns and issues of interest and relevance to TU members. In summary, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 can be used to create peer-learning opportunities for trade unionists, further exchange of information amongst trade unionists and can inform understanding of workplace practices (see Table 2). The following figure summarizes how different web versions (including Web 1.0) can impact common responsibilities among TUs, despite differences TUs may have in terms of constituencies and aims.

Table 2 Differences in Web Versions and Use by TUs

Web 1.0	Web 2.0	Web 3.0
Access for TU members to the internet. TU portal. Homepage	Interactive discussion and communication	Personalized / customized TU member services and offerings. TU member focus
Information display and dissemination	Real-time data updates and feeds	Connected / comprehensive knowledge base for members. Data life streams
Outbound communication	Social participation	Smart large scale TU applications
Collection of static / read only documents	Data generation, TU member generated content	Automation, TU member self service
TU focus	Read / write capability through blogs and wikis	Virtual communities, Communities of practice
	Search	Intelligent (semantic) search
		User engagement

Sources: Naik and Shivalingaiah (2018)

The web can also be used as a tool for social, economic, industrial and workplace protest (Weaver, 2010). The Clue Trains Manifesto (Levine et al, 2017) examines the impact of the Internet on marketing, claiming that conventional marketing techniques are rendered obsolete by the online "conversations" that consumers have and that companies need to join (The Cluetrain, 2018). Similarly, Locke et al, (2001) spoke of: 'The end of business as usual' and it is against this background and in the context of Web 2.0/Web 3.0 that new forms of protest and arranging protests (e.g. flash mobs) have evolved. Smith and Harwood (2011:10) provide a striking illustration:

"Spiegel Online reported on a dispute involving the trade union Verdi which represents more than one million employees in the retail and public sectors. Verdi organised a flash mob of around 150 people at a shopping centre in the town of Aschersleben. The protest came after disagreements over pay and work conditions between Verdi and retail bosses across three states in the centre of Germany. The group filled shopping trolleys with a range of products but when it came to paying for the goods they handed over cards with political slogans such as 'fair wages' instead of credit or debit cards. The action caused severe disruption in business with some stores spending a whole day in re-shelving the

goods. Doris Finke, union secretary of Verdi told a local newspaper, ‘*With this new form of strike we wanted to draw attention to our problems. But we also wanted to let our colleagues in other sales areas know about our problems.*’”

On the issue of disputes, Smith and Harwood (2011, p.10) write:

‘In the East Lindsey Refinery much of the organising was done via websites, such as shopstewards.net and SMS messaging. This enabled a local dispute to spread to over 20 other construction sites across the country overnight. Moreover, websites created by the trade union stewards engendered much wider support that went beyond that of union members. The dispute itself centred around several hundred workers brought in from other countries in Europe to work at the refinery. They were housed on a barge to which they were largely confined outside of work hours. Normally the influx of temporary workers to the site would have boosted the local economy but because this did not happen, local hoteliers, shop owners and caravan park owners added their support to the dispute via the website.’

Importantly, the Web and its applications allows TUs and union members to act as *citizen journalists* and create their own news stories. These can then feed into, as well as challenge, the traditional media’s views which can be influenced by employers’ attempts to manage the news through for example, press releases. This allows activists the freedom to express their views, challenge managerial worldviews, protest and organise. This often results in mainstream media news coverage, which gives additional publicity and popular kudos to the respective social media sites. There has been remarkable growth in social networking. In the world occupied by Web it is important that TUs communicate in partnership with, rather than just to their members. Web can facilitate a new channel of information distribution that has at its core the ideal of communication travelling up and not just down the union hierarchy.

Moreover, industrial sabotage (Abubakar and Arasli, 2016; Brown, 1977; Dubois, 1979) is not uncommon and Web can be used to ferment discontent and grievances, challenge management’s right to manage and lead to disruption of work and the value

creating process. It can be used to help TUs get across their message, to communicate directly with their members and other stakeholders to shape and influence media and public opinion. It can also be used to ferment new thoughts on ways of working and deliver innovations in products and services. Web can thus serve as a tool that can facilitate both the destruction and the creation of value. It can be used to facilitate the co-creation of value (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Vargo, Maglio and Akaka, 2008). It can also be used to generate dissent as well as consent to the workplace employment regime. It can be employed to help unions win over, or as the case may be lose, the hearts and minds of consumers, suppliers, and the general public through processes of personalization. Web is a marketing information and communication channel. It facilitates information search, can give new meaning to the experience of being a union member, and can give unions new meaning and relevance to a technologically web aware demographic.

### ***Problematising TU use of the Web and Social Media***

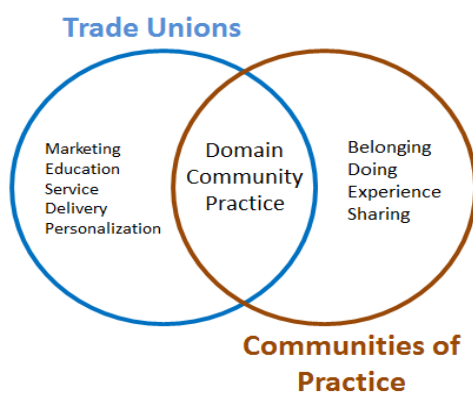
However, equally Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 present a range of challenges and potential benefits and it is important to consider how TUs might overcome these. The broadcasting of benefits echoes what has been signalled above as what is essentially a technological deterministic approach in that new technologies are seen as inevitably and inexorably conferring performative and efficiency benefits through macro-organizational (TU) strategies (Dafoe, 2015; Stokes, 2016) and the sense of building a community of practice within the TU setting (Wenger, 1998; Wenger and Wenger-Tryner, 2018). Certainly, strong precedents of mobilisation (of communities of practice) through social media have been cited above and also exist in, for example, major event such as the Arab Spring which was allegedly largely orchestrated rhizomatically through social media (Conway, 2016; Akaev, 2017).

However, personalization through Web applications introduces a force which ironically potentially works against this and produces a paradox. TUs in often seeking to build association and community nevertheless may find that many contemporary Internet tools promote individuality as much as solidarity. This tension was underlined in Figure 1, which signalled how web technology – Web 2.0 and emerging Web 3.0 – differs



from extant traditional TU settings and macro-approaches (mass-communication rather than personalized relationship) and what implications these differences may present in relation to communicating in consultation for example, and in partnership with their members. Moreover, it is important to consider how such technologies may play a role in embedding the concept of democratic participation in, and throughout, processes of union communication and engendering resistance to managerial and organizational power. In summary, Figure 2 below diagrammatically conceptualises and charts the changes and dynamics taking place around TUs in relation to Communities of Practice.

**Fig. 2 TU's as Communities of Practice**



The nature of the Web environment can help employees and trade unionists to communicate in novel manners. Smith and Harwood (2011:7) write:

‘Organisations are now beginning to use social media tools as a means of engaging with the workforce at a collective level. Where this occurs it is primarily done through a blend of existing corporate platforms such as intranets, instant messaging, internal chat forums and corporate blogs through to Facebook, Twitter, wikis or dedicated social network development platforms such as Ning.’

Communication is critical to the successful workings of business and TUs (Cornelissen, Bekkum van and Ruler van, 2006; Day, 2018; Van Riel and Fombrum, 2007). Web is an open space in which issues can be raised, problems identified and answers proposed – see for example the use of crowdsourcing (whereby services and ideas are sourced free from users of the Internet) (Howe, 2009). Such technology changes the nature of

communication and it becomes more interactive, democratic, participatory, immediate and responsive (Fernando, 2007; Day 2018). TUs, therefore, need to work in partnership with their members and community of stakeholders in order to communicate, send and receive messages that can inform policy, practice, perception and understanding. Hodder and Houghton (2015:185), by way of example, report on University and College Union (UCU) use of social media and in particular Twitter and do so: ‘by examining the content of union messages sent from UCU, and through providing a detailed analysis of the union’s audience.’ Hodder and Houghton (2015:187) write: ‘[We have examined...] union use of social media in the UK and found that while UCU is using Twitter, *it is not utilising the full potential offered by Web 2.0.*’ [Emphasis added]

Online communication in the social web can shape and influence TU image, brand and reputation both to the good and bad and an under-developed approach means that TUs can be vulnerable. TUs has traditionally been done by word of mouth for example by union representatives in the workplace but the internet and has in part changed this to a ‘word of mouse’ basis (Brown, Broderick and Lee, 2007; Leeflang et al 2014). Moreover, it is important that TUs and their members abide by the unwritten rules of Web engagement and behave in a socially responsible, ethical and appropriate manner. Conversations and information disclosed on-line can have both intended and unintended consequences, in that, details can be leaked, mocked, challenged, and the communication message may take on a whole new form and meaning from that originally intended. TUs and their members can use Web to reveal managerial failings, flaws, and breaches of law and of corporate governance (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010; D’Arcy and Young, 2012). Management can potentially be damaged and put on notice to act responsibly by information leaked through the tool of Web 2.0 (Pfeffer, Zorbach and Carley, 2014). Participating in the social web also opens up TUs and their members to increased scrutiny and accountability of their policies, comments, practices, actions and activities. Hence active involvement is an absolute necessity.

Alternatively, it is important to consider potential drawbacks for TUs and union members using Web for example management may use it as a tool of worker discipline and control (Foucault, 1975; Edwards, 1979; Friedman, 1977a; Friedman, 1977b). Information gathered by monitoring the views of employees or future employees in

open online Web forums might be used by management to select, recruit and reward those expressing a managerial compliant world view. Equally employees expressing discontent or challenging the managerial worldview might be subject to monitoring and work discipline (Pritchard, 2009). Moreover, appraisal systems through the Internet and monitoring of Web and on-line usage by employees potentially constitute serious controls over individuals. TUs and their members should be alert to the fact that management may also contribute to, and lobby on, the social web and use it to influence opinion and debate. In many instances, companies and organizations may have more financial and human capital resources to engage in such work.

In addition it is important to keep in mind that Web is a collaborative venture. TUs and their members add content and help shape the social web. It serves as an example of TUs and their members working together to achieve shared objectives and outcomes. Web can be used to help progress discussion, find solutions and address a range of TU issues (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Shostak, 2017). It can, or could, help to enrich and add value to the TU service experience. The community of TU social web users place, amend, update, remove as well as debate content and in so doing ownership becomes socially shared in line with the ideals of social democratic trade unionism. In the social web meaning also becomes socially shared (Greaves and Mika, 2008) as changes are made and new views and opinions change and challenge prevailing worldviews and modes of thought. Web can help promote TU equal opportunities policies and practices. TUs and their members communicate and relate to one another in new ways in the evolving world of Web 2.0. Knowledge is more distributed, accessible and open to challenge.

In summary, TUs have made a degree of progress in engaging with the evolving world and possible opportunities of the Web and its applications. In particular, a range of examples of good practice from the Scandinavia and wider European context have been provided. However, equally, there exist a range of tensions which need to be addressed. Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 provide the possibility of moving communication and member/community engagement from a traditional macro-basis to a more micro-personalized basis. However paradoxically individualisation and personalization could represent a threat to the solidarity of community. Moreover, the above evidence indicates that many TUs continue to employ macro-focused top-down approaches to

communication which run contrary to the spirit and opportunities of the new web technologies. In this way, TUs are demonstrating a powerful predilection for a technological determinist approach which risks not fully appreciating the human dimensions of member everyday lived experience in various branch and organizational settings. The paper now focuses on a case study from the service sector in the United Kingdom context and illustrates and examines these challenges.

### **Methodology**

The argument has identified a range of opportunities and tensions in relation to TU engagement with the Web in general and with Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 in particular. However, equally the paper has identified that there are a range of risks which unions need to understand and address if they are to capitalise on the potential of personalization while maintaining notions of community. In order to examine these issues and challenges, the paper develops and introduces a case study which allows the tension between the TU macro-organizational approach and perspective and the personalization and connectivity at the micro-individual level within a branch. The setting is a quasi-governmental organization located in the north of the United Kingdom. The TU concerned is a national service-sector organization. The research employed a qualitative stance (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The argument adheres to Siggelkow's (2007) advice and has contextualised the data in relation to wider instances drawn from the relevant literature and documents. The project engaged semi-structured interviews and participant observation (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011; Spradley, 1980). The data were collected between 2016 and 2017 from 11 respondents involving a range of staff members and TU Committee Members with sampling taking place on a purposive convenience basis. Confidentiality of respondent and organizational identities were assured.

The research sought to draw out the everyday lived experience (Knights and Willmott, 1999) of TU operation in handling and experiencing with the TU Head Office and the organizational management and directorate set against a backdrop of evolving Internet technology and work intensification and disputes. The study used template analysis (King and Horrocks, 2010) in order to understand the data. This identified key main themes and sub-themes from the data set producing groupings of Findings.

## **Background Context**

The quasi-governmental case study organization has been established for several decades and is involved in the training, development and consultancy sector. It has changed its business portfolio substantially in recent times in order to react to, and engage with, changing market conditions. Relations between senior management and the workforce had been mixed during the last decade as senior management has become increasingly strident and trust has been damaged.

The case focuses on the Branch Union experience of dealing with organizational employment challenges for its members. These included a management that generally behaved in an imperious and baronial manner. The senior management could also undertake what prima facie seemed like behaviour exhibiting very human acts and kindness. However, based on respondent reported experiences all too often this was based on favouritism or staff being compliant. Also there was a sense that ‘games were being played’ and many acts of consideration were felt to be part of some form or other of manipulation and politicking. As one respondent employed the term, management employed: ‘the iron hand in the velvet glove’ [Respondent D]. The Branch Union based at the organization had a committee but this was not fully staffed due to a combination of lack of interest, ‘fence-sitting’, or fear of reaction or reprisal by management for being in the union and having to raise difficult topics with management. This made those individuals who were on the committee over-stretched and weary. The previous head of the branch union had been made redundant.

Head Office of the union seemed very remote to the Branch Union. The communications would reportedly generally come verbally via telephone calls and occasionally emails to the Chair of the Branch Union. In relation to social media and Internet presence the communication was primarily generic, rather than individual or ‘personalized’, and pointed at the national membership. Table 3 below indicates the respondent list and roles:

Table 3: List of field study respondents and their roles	
Respondent	Respondent Role

#A	Staff member
#B	Union committee member
#C	Staff member
#D	Union committee member
#E	Staff member
#F	Staff member
#G	Union committee member
#H	Staff member
#I	Union committee chair

(Table 3)

## Findings

Applications such as Web 2.0 or Web 3.0 were not strongly evident in the daily lives of the respondents in the case context. There was little or no evidence of ‘personalization’ (Wilson, 2007; Osak, 2011). A majority of Internet and social media comprised only the general National Union website sending out periodic emails of generic topics. Respondents reported that they did not feel that the National Union Internet or social media applications ‘spoke directly to us’. [Respondent B]. The Findings are developed below within a Communities of Practice Conceptual Framework of Domain, Community and Practice.

### ***The Primordial Nature of Micro-Community ‘Domain’: Action and Sensemaking***

There was no real great sense by respondents of connectivity with the larger and activities of the overall union. A majority of respondent conversations reinforced the notion that much of the attention and sense-making was in the *local domain* of their organization rather than beyond its boundaries. Respondents appeared completely absorbed with the internal struggles and conflicts with management over various member cases. This seemed to demand all their time and, apart from some contact with the Legal Department at Head Office via email and telephone, there was no other reported contact through social media or ‘personalized’ on-line/Internet services and applications:

‘I have my job to do in addition to the case load and I rarely have much contact with Head Office. I really don’t find the general information and messages we get from the union website very useful at all. It’s all promotion and grandstanding by senior union officials.’ [Respondent C]

‘We don’t need ‘blah, blah, blah’ [social media] information on national campaigns and initiatives from Head Office. We need help here. We are fighting real battles here, this is the front-line and they are back in the Chateau at HQ without a real clue how we are being crushed and threatened by management on a daily basis.’ [Respondent G]

In summary, respondents seemed to connect more with their immediate colleagues and ‘local’ work community rather than any wider (for example, Head Office) entity or setting. The TU website was not strongly set up in its current form for Web 2.0 or Web 3.0 type interaction. There seemed to be more sense-making around the local/micro rather than the remote/macro contexts.

### ***Absent Union ‘Community’ at the Macro-Level: Alienation and Isolation of Members***

Respondents, especially Branch Union committee members, indicated repeatedly that they generally felt a great ‘sense of distance’ [Respondent I] from the main Union Office. The Branch Committee was understaffed with many volunteer vacancies unfilled and people reported feeling that case load was over-powering. No respondents indicated that the Internet or social media played a potent or extensive role in alleviating or ameliorating this situation:

‘It is very difficult to get anyone at Head Office to respond to issues and questions – I guess they must be very busy. The only means we have really are telephone or email unless we drop in but there are some distance away and of course there is no guarantee that they will be at their desk’ [Respondent I].

‘I tend to work mainly with people here in the Branch. We are pretty much alone and quite frankly I’m not sure what they [Head Office] do all day. We need more support here because we are sinking’. [Respondent G]

Respondents seemed to refer more readily to their own immediate environment rather than a wider world of union activity or locations. In this way, their experience was primordially micro-focused and any sense of being part of, or interacting with, a ‘bigger picture’ or macro-dimension of contact with the main TU Head Office or wider organizational bodies did not surface in the reported data. Overall, respondents strongly indicated that they felt a sense of remoteness and even alienation from the Head Office. There was little evidence that Web applications significantly enhanced their experience of Union activity.

### ***Misunderstood ‘Practice’: The Workplace Primacy of Non-Social Media Communication***

Most generally, respondents cited email as being the most employed form of communication within the workplace and in relation to union business also - even in this case it was frequently only the Branch Chair who was the hub for receipt of emails from the Head Office and reciprocally emails from the Branch to Head Office seemed to take a very long time to receive a reply (and sometimes not at all). There was no evidence of applications such as Web 2.0 or Web 3.0 playing a role in people’s everyday professional life. However, respondents indicated that they used various social media applications (for example, *Facebook*<sup>™</sup>, *LinkedIn*<sup>™</sup>, *Whatsapp*<sup>™</sup> etc) extensively in their private life. Nevertheless, there was an overlap where these applications were used to exchange informal information, updates and gossip which could, on occasion, relate to work issues and situations.

‘I tend to find out a lot about what is going on around the institution and at other places by staying in contact with friends other places.’[Respondent H]

There was also the issue that due to heightened work intensification, there was not sufficient time to spend extended periods of time engaging with the Web – clients had to be met and work conducted with them; meetings had to be attended and so on.



Respondents also signalled that there was not a particularly strong interface or interaction with the Union through the web in any event. Replies on messaging and interactive conversational boards seemed to be unreliable. Staff member respondents indicated that they tended to catch up with Branch Union Committee Members rather than bother trying to speak to Head Office.

## **Discussion**

The field data in conjunction with the literature commentary point up a range of important issues. In a contemporary professional world where the Internet and social media are often deemed to be omnipresent and omnipotent (Tuten & Solomon, 2017), the case study and literature critique points at the importance of the local and small community-based sensemaking that takes place in a given workplace (Wenger, 1998, Weick, 1995). This is no less the case than in the instance of union activity which is frequently enmeshed in some form of negotiation or confrontation with organizational management on a local working terms issue. As indicated in the case, these exchanges can sometimes be challenging and difficult. In this way the micro-setting and organizational context with its daily context and human interaction and proximity was more important to respondents than the macro-level Web-based experiences created by the Union. In parallel with Robertson and Kee, (2017), the exception to this was in the individual choices regarding interacting with their own friends and personal contacts on social media applications.

There are also paradoxes at play which are signalled by the case and the overall argument. Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 applications point at the possibility of creating heightened *personalization* in workplace social media based platforms and work experiences. However, in the context of the union and the interaction of the Head Office or centre with the branch this was not at all the case. Rather, respondents (see Respondent I for example) felt that the Head Office operations felt a long way away and remote – advanced Internet technologies did not seem to play a strong role in improving or redressing this. ‘Personalization’ did not seem to be achieved through the Web but rather through localised community which created a sense of identity and belonging. Alternatively, the only way in which social media applications played a role

was in an informal sense where people used personal interfaces (*Facebook*<sup>™</sup> etc) in order to share information with work friends about what was happening in various work settings and situations. In this way the contact was more rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998) than binary or linear. The Head Office sought to conduct its relations in the latter manner and seemed to completely overlook some of the real complexities and realities of interaction on the Web and Internet. The promise of ‘24/7 interaction’ (Freeman, 2002) was certainly a rhetorical gesture and empty promise for Branch Union Members rather than a reality.

In essence, the TU in the case study, a major organization, appeared to have a range of serious oversights and misunderstandings in relation to how it was (or more accurately was not) engaging with its membership. Overall, the Union Head Office, apart from a generally very poor record on communication, seemed to make very weak use of social media and Web 2.0, Web 3.0 applications. Yet the sense was that staff at Head Office believed that they were in close personal contact with branches and, moreover, that Internet applications were playing an important role. In this way, the union Head Office seemed to be beguiled by a technological deterministic (Dafoe, 2015) view whereby they believed that the website and the simple presence of a Web-based technological environment would facilitate and enhance communication with branches and members. The field data indicated that this was not the case and that members generally felt isolated and the web-based applications played no such role. Thus, for respondents, the micro-context (their organization, their work friends and members) represented the primordial community and, indeed, the macro-context of the Head Office and overall union organization seemed to play very little role (in spite of Head Office web-site virtual headlines and announcements purporting to the contrary). Certainly Web 3.0 applications provide a range of opportunities for large entities (sic national unions) to readily engage on a personalized basis with members, however, this was not the case. TUs can use the social web for crowd-sourcing (Howe, 2009) or market research purposes (Patino, Pitta and Quinones, 2012), as a tool of communication and education, to manage and improve their reputation and brand, for peer learning, to recruit new members, explain the benefits of TU membership, to debate issues, run campaigns, lobby, and protest and organize on a personalized basis. In summary, it seemed as if the case TU was operating in strange hybrid form of Web technology usage. On the one hand, they had Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 portals on their website but there did not seem to

be a responsibility taken by staff at Head Office to make these operationally lived experiences for members. Ironically and perhaps of some concern, the reality of the TUs web operation was more in alignment with Web 1.0 type interactions with members occasionally (but not frequently) using the website for information and mainly depending on email (or indeed telephone). This misguided approach engendered atmospheres characterized by the primordial nature of micro-community 'domain'; and absence of union 'community' between the micro and macro-level; and, misunderstood sense of 'practice'. This created something of an underpowered and even at times lamentable atmosphere around Head Office reputational management which undermined the performance and morale of Branch members.

### **Implications and Limitations**

From the data and analysis provided in this study the case study TU seemed to be misguided regarding the realities of the effectiveness of its engagement with Web-based applications. This is an important oversight and myopia that could lead to ineffective worker representation and information. More importantly, the lack of personalization through available advanced Web-applications by the case study Union (which may indeed be possible to evidence through further studies in wider unions) risks creating disaffection and alienation in members. In turn, this could impact significantly on membership levels. This is a long way short, and substantially different from some of the wider European case examples which have been cited above.

In terms of limitations, the research has elected for a focal case study in order to provide detail on the lived experience of a given context. However, it is readily recognised that this case may not be representative across the entire span of TUs in other sectors and different national contexts/countries. Clearly, this is not the intent, and is beyond the span, of the present study. Further research of micro- and organizational level settings, in varying regional and national settings, will be required.

## **Conclusion**

Unions are important organizations in the fabric of business life in that they represent member interest in the face of occasional managerialism and unfavourable behaviour by businesses. This paper has suggested that the specific case study TU needs to improve their engagement with the Web and build better relationships with members. The Web indeed provides opportunities for new forms of TU engagement, communication, protest and activism and is a tool that can potentially help further TUs aims and objectives. Information exchange, communication and acquisition as well as generation of knowledge are core features of Web technology and can serve to empower individuals and raise awareness and understanding of issues. However, it is important that Unions do not fall into a technological deterministic mind-set whereby they believe that the simple fact of adopting a given application will lead to enhanced performance or service (Dafoe, 2015). This is not an inevitably and in fact optimizing and leveraging value from the Web and the Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 forms of applications requires insight, expertise and political awareness of the lived experience realities of members.

Set against this background, TUs should ensure that they are furthering in real terms their presence and activities in the environment of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 TUs and their members should use Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 to protect and further their interests. On-line conversations in the Web can further assist understanding of issues, campaigns and serve to raise political awareness. In the social web content is negotiated, regularly updated, subject to critique and comment and information is best described as being co-managed and knowledge generated rather than imposed. TUs should aim to build presence in the Web environment so as to add value to members' experiences by for example helping with work-related issues. This might include, for example, reliable and readily interactive discussion platforms; rapid information forums as well as the more macro-related campaigns and information for which much of the web is currently used. However, alongside the technological dimensions it is important to understand the social dimensions of 'personalization', macro-micro organizational tensions and perceptions; and, the lived experience of what 'communities' actually exist and to which individuals and members feel they belong. Only in this way will it be possible to truly develop a sense of community with a sense of belonging and learning together

and overcome the alienation which can exist by an over-emphasis on sustaining macro-relations rather than micro-focused personalized interaction.

There is no doubt, progress has been strong. This present argument has assessed that currently the situation is moving towards beyond mass communication of TU services – communication, education and marketing for some organizations but not automatically necessarily all of them. However, there is still some way to go towards a full potential and personalization powered by Web linkages. The movement and direction of travel that unions are taking, or plan to take, is likely to empower, enlighten and embolden TU members and to raise new issues for discussion and action.

This paper has sought to profile the lived experience (Van Manen, 2016) of the Web in a localised service sector UK context, drawing on and developing the debates in areas such as the politics of work, employment, trade unionism and social media. TUs and their members should use Web 2.0 and 3.0 to debate, lobby, network, recruit and influence as a way to shape and inform public, political, employers and employees opinions. The Web poses a number of challenges for TUs but also opens up a number of opportunities (Pfeffer, Zorbach and Carley, 2014). How best to engage and interact within this social on-line environment is something TUs have to experiment with and learn from. It allows them to deal directly with their members, to garner their views and opinions away from the workplace and managerial interference. It can be used to explain the rationale and purpose of TUs; offer assistance, guidance and advice to members and potential members; and to gather research data to help shape policy.

Web technology can also be engaged to advance TU causes as well as their members' interests. It can help create new understandings and experiences of trade unionism, can be used to mobilise and influence opinion, raise political awareness and develop new conceptions of citizenship. On behalf of their members, TUs negotiate with management about terms and conditions in the workplace. At times negotiations break down and a union may ballot their members for strike action. In this context it is interesting to speculate on the role the Web might play in industrial disputes, industrial unrest and how it might be used to inform, guide and manage strike action. Trade unionists can use the Web to comment on and discuss concerns and grievances they have about changes to their working practices, terms and conditions of employment.

For strikes, industrial disputes and unrest to succeed TUs need to have the support of their membership and also have to carry public opinion with them. The medium of the Web can be used to help reflect as well as shape union members' and the wider public views and opinions on industrial strife. TUs increasingly have to work with the media to get their messages across so as to better represent their members' interests. The Web is an efficient and effective tool that can help democratise workplace communication.

It also brings additional challenges and as Smith and Harwood (2011, p.10-11) write:

“The spread of activism outside the traditional boundaries of workplace collective action provides potentially greater impact, but it also presents TUs, employers and the authorities with more volatile demonstrations and less ability to control action that has the involvement of disparate but well organised groups.”

The politics of the workplace are being transformed by the disruptive communication technology of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0. Many Unions have yet to address these new realities.

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