

UNION RECRUITMENT AND ORGANISING ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

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Abstract

Within the labour movement claims are made for the potential of the World Wide Web and other information and communication technology (ICT) to reinvigorate a union movement in decline. This paper provides a first step in understanding how unions are interacting with ICTs to recruit and organise members by documenting and analysing their use of one particular ICT, the World Wide Web. Despite the investment of unions in Web technology, to date there is limited academic research on how unions use the web. The first part of the paper examines the various ways in which the Web can assist recruitment and organising. The second half of the paper explores how Australian unions are using the Web. This section analyses the results of a survey of the websites of Australian unions.

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UNION RECRUITMENT AND ORGANISING ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

INTRODUCTION

A significant literature, both academic and popular, is emerging that lauds the potential of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), in particular the Web, to enhance organisational performance. Within the labour movement similar claims are made for the potential of the Web and other ICTs to reinvigorate a union movement in decline. The terms e-union (Darlington, 2000) and cyberunion (Shostak, 1999 & 2002) have been coined to describe the new form of unions that are arising, or will in the future, as a result of this technological revolution. Unions are themselves acknowledging the importance of information and communication technology (ICT).

The World Wide Web is a big part of the new communication technologies. Unions in industrialised countries have actively engaged with the Web. Research by the LSE Centre for Economic Performance found a total of 2685 union websites (Diamond & Freeman, 2001). The majority of these are for unions in OECD countries and over half are in English speaking countries, a reflection of how the English language dominates the Web. Australian unions accounted for 5.5 per cent of these websites. The majority of Australian unions have a website. Despite the investment of unions in the web, to date there is limited academic research on how unions use the web.

This paper builds upon the existing literature by documenting and examining how Australian unions use the Web to support recruitment and organising. The research consists of a survey of 102 Australian union websites at the national, state, division and branch levels. The survey searched for specific content relating to the type and extent of recruitment and organising initiatives, the use of interactive tools (for example, discussion lists, web forums and live events), the documentation of major disputes, and the type of links provided to broader industrial and community issues. Before discussing the survey results the paper reviews the literature on unions and the Internet and discusses the possibilities the Web offers union with respect to recruiting and organising members.

WHY SHOULD UNIONS USE THE WEB?

A common feature of English speaking countries has been the challenge to union membership. Since 1982 the proportion of the Australian workforce who are union members has dropped from 49 per cent to around 25 per cent in 2000 (Derry, et al, 2001: 217). This decline has been attributed to changes in the structure of employment – including a shift from manufacturing to service employment and the growth of non-standard employment, more aggressive anti-union employer strategies, unfavourable government policies and legislation, a sustained period of economic recession and a reduced willingness of workers to join unions, particularly young workers (Griffin & Svensen, 1996). Against this background, much attention has been focused on the need to rejuvenate the union movement to capture and ignite the workers.

A literature is developing, both in academic and practitioner publications, that explores the potential of ICTs, in particular the Internet and the Web, to assist with union renewal strategies. For example, it is argued that the Internet overcomes time, space and distance to unite workers. This is particularly useful for women and those in non-standard employment whose working patterns often mitigate against union involvement (Greene et al, 2001). Similarly, the Web allows unions to tell their story directly rather than through the filter of a mass media that is both commercially and politically driven (Ad Hoc Committee on Labor and the Web, 1999). This literature is buoyed by the rapid expansion of the Internet.

The Internet has grown at a phenomenal pace. Usage rates show an exponential increase in the number of people connected to the Web. It is estimated there are over 500 million users world wide (Nua Internet Surveys, 2002a). In Australia the number of households with access to the Internet grew from one in six in 1998 to one in three in 2000 (ABS, 2000). Nielsen NetRatings February 2002 survey estimated 10.6 million Australians, that is, 54 percent of the population, use the Internet (Nua Internet Surveys, 2002b). This puts Australia among the leading countries in terms of the proportion of the population accessing the Internet

(Nua Internet Surveys, 2002a). Nevertheless Internet access is associated with age, income and education, with the young, higher income earners and well-educated more likely to have access. Importantly, one of the union movements main target groups, young people, are particularly likely to use the Internet with 73 per cent of 18 to 24 year olds accessing the internet in 2000 (ABS, 2000).

The emerging literature suggests several ways that the Web will revive unions (Diamond and Freeman, 2001). First, there are numerous descriptions of the range of services unions can provide over the Web (Ad Hoc Committee on Labor and the Web, 1999; Cohen & Joseph, 1999; Darlington, 2000; Greene et al, 2001, Hogan & Grieco, c.2000; Lee, 1996; Shostak, 1999). The most obvious of these is providing information on the union and the benefits offered, both industrial and non-industrial, and providing on-line access to these services where possible. Second, several writers have stressed the organising/recruitment role of the Web (TUC, 2001; Greene et al, 2000; Shostak, 1999 & 2002). Aside from selling the benefits of union membership, a union can provide a membership form to download. In addition, the Web can be used to create an organising culture through promoting campaigns and providing information for workplace delegates including information about training. Third, it is claimed web-based technologies will enhance union democracy (Greene et al, 2001; Greene & Hogan, 2001; Greer, 2002: 216-7; Lucore, 2002: 212-13). The Web allows unions to provide information about the governance of the union as well as allowing two-way communication through on-line discussion forums. Fourth, the web has been used to help organise and conduct industrial action with several unions developing dispute specific websites (Dropkin, 1996; TUC, 2001). Finally, the Web, but more broadly the Internet, is seen as an avenue for international union organisation and co-operation (Bailey, 2000; Hodgkinson, 2001; Waterman, 1999). While the focus of this paper is on the recruiting and organising potential of the Web, it is important to recognise that activities in any one of these areas will have an influence on the other areas.

Apart from Chaison (2002) and Troy (2001) the literature is generally positive and optimistic about the potential of new technologies to renew unions, though qualifications and cautions are raised. Certainly proponents note the need for ICTs to assist rather than replace more traditional communication methods. Such a position helps these authors overcome the problem of the digital divide. Indeed, one article notes the potential for those with access to the Internet to share information with those without access (Greene & Hogan, 2001). While it is not the purpose of this paper to challenge the potential of the Web, it must be acknowledged that the digital divide may not be present within workplaces. This suggests that investment in a website may not be appropriate or necessary for all unions.

At this stage there is little evidence to support or refute the optimism of many writers with much of the work to date based on anecdotal evidence or case studies of particular unions (for an example see Pizzigati *et al*, 2002). A study by Greer (2002) examined the content on the websites of US national unions. This study focused on content in relation to union democracy, e-voice, collective bargaining and political activism. The study found websites largely neglected democracy and e-voice issues, and only around half of those surveyed featured collective bargaining content. However, 84 per cent of websites surveyed covered political issues. The paper reports on a similar survey to that conducted by Greer (2002), albeit with a focus on Australian unions. However, the focus of this paper is restricted to those aspects of content that related to recruitment and organising.

RECRUITING AND ORGANISING THROUGH THE WEB

Union renewal refers to the need for unions to rethink their entire way of operating, from objectives through to structure and behaviour. A key component is the need to change the way they recruit and organise, particularly among groups of workers who have historically been outside the union movement. Cyber organising involves using ICTs such as email, websites, intranets, and video conferencing to build connections between union officials and ordinary members. These new forms of communication are seen to complement rather than replace traditional modes of communication between officials and rank and file. They enable union officials to overcome the problems of time and distance. For example, email, which can be used for both mass communication and personalised messages, allows officials to maintain regular contact with workplace delegates and members and to disperse news and information in a timely manner. Similarly,

members and delegates can communicate with officials without needing to leave phone messages or make appointments.

Similarly, the Web, which is the focus of this paper, offers unions new ways to establish relationships with members and potential members. How union do or should use the Web is inextricably linked with their recruitment and organising strategies. Under pressure from the ACTU, a number of Australian unions have been forced to rethink these strategies in recent years. The shift from a servicing model of unionism to an organising model challenges traditional ideas regarding how to recruit new members. The new model moves the focus away from union officials and places it firmly on the role of members.

The Australian union movement adopted the organising model in 1994. After extensive research on organising methods that were having success in the United States the ACTU established Organising Works to recruit and train new recruiters/organisers and to create an organising culture in participating unions (Cooper, 2000). The organising model stresses members should take some responsibility for solving their own workplace problems. Hence the emphasis is on developing the participation and activism of the membership largely through building workplace organisation and giving members greater control over the management of grassroots issues. This contrasts with the servicing model which is said to have characterised Australian unions prior to the 1990s. Under this model union officials took responsibility for dispute management, in most cases in the context of conciliation and arbitration, and levied a fee for this and other services while members remained passive (Griffith & Moors, 2002: 2).

While initial problems occurred with the transition to the organising model and the development of an organising culture within unions, the ACTU has persevered with and expanded the Organising Works programme. While debate has ensued over the success of the organising model, the publication of the *Unions@Work* report clearly placed the model at the centre of the union movement (Griffin & Moors, 2002: 6). Yet after eight years of operation, an organising culture is still confined to only a small number of Australian unions (Cooper, 2002; Ellem, 2001; Griffin & Moors, 2002; Holland and Hanley, 2002).

There are clear parallels between the organising model and the e-union concept. As mentioned the organising model is based on developing workplace participation. Issues and campaigns are member driven and members are empowered and encouraged to solve them by building a collective identity at the workplace. While union organisers work to establish initial contacts and set up workplace committees if possible, their main role is to provide training and support. Similarly, e-unions are said to empower members. Both concepts have similarities to the concept of empowerment in the management literature. Yet in all cases the concept is rather hollow. Just as managers have been reluctant to cede control to employees in the workplace, union officials have failed to give control to members at the workplace (Cooper, 2001, 2002; Ellem, 2001).

A further feature of both the organising model and e-unionism has been an emphasis on organising beyond the workplace. This involves establishing contact with, and providing resources to, workers in workplaces where there are no existing members and/or victimisation is likely to be a problem (Cooper, 2000: 585). There are several examples of websites established to provide resources to unorganised workers in order to encourage them to join a union. In Australia the IT Workers Alliance website has this objective and is maintained with the financial support of the NSW Labor Council (*Workplace Express*, 2001).

Despite the limitations of the organising model, it provides valuable insights into the various ways the Web can assist unions. Certainly the Web can be used for far more than just providing information on membership benefits and how to join, though this is still important. The potential of the Web to assist recruiting and organising lies in the ability to mobilise members and non-members. Through the profiling of union campaigns and disputes, and the posting of up-to-date news and information, a good union website can help members identify with the union. The web can both create activism and provide resources to support activism. Provision of information regarding organising, the role of delegates, union training, union policies and enterprise bargaining can assist members take responsibility for identifying and managing workplace issues. In addition, a union website can also facilitate two-way communication between officials and members and between members themselves through the establishment of on-line discussion forums and feedback forms. According to Greene and Hogan (2001) establishing democratic processes in unions is

essential to mobilising members. Representativeness, accountability and transparency are central to gaining the necessary participation of members associated with mobilising and in giving members control of the agenda at the grassroots level.

AUSTRALIAN UNION WEBSITES

The review of the literature suggests that the Web can be used in a variety of ways to assist unions recruit and organise their members. While literature highlights examples of best practice websites and innovative uses of the Web, there is little systematic analysis of how unions are actually using the Web. This section of the paper explores the use of the Web by Australian unions.

Methodology

This research for this paper is drawn from a survey investigating websites of Australian unions at the national, state, division and branch levels. The survey included a total of 102 union websites. This accounts for about two thirds of the entire number of union websites for Australian unions. The survey is restricted to those unions affiliated to the ACTU or one of the various State or regional trades and labour councils, and includes unions covering both public and private sector, manual and non-manual, and skilled and unskilled workers.

A complicating factor is the inclusion of different levels of union organisation in the sample of union websites. Very few unions adopted a single website for all levels of the union. In Australia the role and function of each level of the union is dependent on the history and structure of that particular union. The amalgamations that took place in the early 1990s also complicate the lines of responsibilities within unions. As such, we may expect an overlap of content in the websites of national and state branches of the same union due to political tensions within the union. Thus, it would seem appropriate to include all levels of union organisation with a separate website. A chi square test did not reveal the level of union organisation to be significant influence on website content. A further limitation of the survey was the inability to search member-only sections of websites. A significant number of websites (26.5 per cent) had a members-only section. Nevertheless, a chi squared analysis of the difference between websites with and without member-only sections did not suggest this had a significant influence on the type of content present.

The survey collected categorical data regarding the presence or absence of specified types of content. Drawing on the e-union and organising literature, specified content related to four categories is identified: recruiting, union democracy, mobilising, and beyond workplace issues. The results are shown in Table 1.

Recruiting

The most obvious benefit of a union website is the ability to provide potential members with information on how they can join the union and why they should. While a legal requirement for a signature prevents unions from enrolling members on the Web, they can provide a membership form on the web page. This assists potential members who for various reasons may not have contact with union organisers or delegates at the workplace. To encourage people to join it would also seem necessary to provide information on the benefits of unionism. The survey contained five questions regarding the presence of content related to recruiting.

The results show that a majority of unions provide at least basic information on the benefits of membership and details of how to join. However, 26 per cent of websites did not provide details on how to join. In some cases this reflected high membership density and the circumscribed nature of membership, for example the various police associations. A surprising result is the large number of websites that do not specifically address the issue of why workers should join the union. Another surprising result is the large percentage of unions that do not allow potential members to download a membership form, despite the technical simplicity of doing so.

Table 1: Website Content of Australian Unions

Activity	Percent of unions with feature
Recruitment	
Separate ‘why join’ section	51
How to join information	74
Membership form	53
Information regarding industrial services	68
Information regarding non-industrial services	76
Union democracy	
Office bearers listed/profiled	73
Governance information	47
Minutes/reports of meetings, conferences, etc.	13
Union policies/principles	28
On-line discussion forums	7
Feedback	94
Mobilising	
All news	74
General news	56
News subscription	24
Media releases	33
Dispute profiled and updated	34
Campaigns profiled	35
Enterprise bargaining updates	21
Hot issues	14
Awards/Enterprise agreements on-line	42
Delegates information	25
Organising information	5
Union training information	27
Social and Political Activism	
Political issues	20
Community issues	16
General union movement issues	20
Professional Issues	46

Creating Opportunities for Participation (Union Democracy)

The survey also looked for evidence of content that would enhance union democracy. Union democracy involves two aspects. First, providing information to members about the goals and activities of the union, and in particular the decision-making processes. The survey included questions that sought to identify content that could improve democracy within unions. These questions related to governance issues such as listing or profiling office bearers of the union, providing information on governance structures and details about meetings, conferences etc., and providing on-line access to union policies or principles. The later included placing submissions to government inquiries and the like on-line as well. Second, union democracy requires establishing avenues for member participation in decision-making. As such, there were also questions relating to the presence of on-line discussion forums and feedback forms.

Table 1 shows the frequency of yes responses to union democracy related content. The overwhelming conclusion from Table 1 is the failure of the majority of union websites to provide any real depth of information regarding the governance of the union or to encourage debate between members in a forum where union officials can monitor and interact. Although 76 per cent of websites identified officer bearers of the union, in many cases this involved no more than listing their names and providing a contact phone number or email address. In only a few cases did this involve a profile of union officers, including their background and current activities. In addition, while 94 per cent of websites allowed for feedback, in more than half of these cases this amounted to no more than an email address. Though it must be noted that a significant minority of websites actively encouraged feedback and provided an electronic form. With respect to direct participation, only 7 of the 102 websites surveyed had an on-line discussion forum and in all cases these were discussion boards. In 4 cases there were multiple discussion boards. Overall the discussion boards were used but not extensively.

Mobilising Activists

The key to effective organising, according to the organising model, is to mobilise the membership by ensuring members identify with, and participate and engage in union activities. There are two aspects to this. First, members need to be aware of current activities and campaigns that the union may be engaged in. This can help build awareness of issues as well as solidarity (Greene *et al*, 2000). The Web can be a valuable tool with respect to this goal. It allows the publication of the latest developments in a timely manner. It also allows the union and its members to tell their own story, rather than relying on the second hand reporting of journalists (Ad Hoc Committee on Labor and the Web, 1999: 6; Lucore, 2002: 210). Second, central to mobilising the membership is the development of a network of workplace delegates/activists who can provide leadership and direction to their workplace colleagues. These delegates are central to building activism among members at the workplace and helping members take ownership of issues. The Web can assist with the development of delegates and activists by providing information on their role, including the organising role, and providing details of union training that is available to members to develop and support their delegate/activist skills.

The survey contained a several questions about the presence of content related to providing up-to-date news about the activities of the union and the provision of on-line resources for delegates and other activists. The survey attempted to distinguish between the provision of general news and to tailoring of news to specific disputes, issues or campaigns, thus making it easier to identify and trace the history of these issues. Hence, the survey also identified websites that provided regular up-dates on industrial disputes, or profiled the union's industrial campaigns or issues of current concern (hot issues). Finally, given the importance of enterprise bargaining, websites that devoted a page to up-dating current negotiations were also identified. Overall, 74 per cent of websites surveyed reported news in either a general or specific format. By far the most common method for reporting news was to post news items by date, often with the most recent on the homepage. These news items related to both industrial and non-industrial activities of the union or its members. In a limited number of cases news was, or could be, sorted by sector, industry or occupational group. A minority of websites tailored their news to the specific activities and issues the union engaged in. In some cases this could be a reflection of the union's inactivity. For example, if the union is not currently engaged in enterprise bargaining negotiations they will have nothing to report. Nevertheless, a feature of the organising model is the need to identify issues around which members can be mobilised.

The results also show that a minority of unions are using their websites to attract or provide information and resources for workplace delegates. Information regarding organising is particularly uncommon. However, it is highly probable that this type of content is included in the member only sections of some websites. In addition, while only 42 per cent of websites reproduced or provided a link to relevant awards and enterprise agreements on-line, for some unions, especially those that cover a range of industries and occupations, this may have been impractical. Moreover, in several cases it was quite clear that this information was provided in the members only section of the website.

Beyond Industrial and Workplace Issues

A key feature of union renewal and new approaches to organising is the need for unions to recruit workers that have not traditionally been covered by unions. Where existing union organisation is absent it is imperative that unions gain access to workers outside of the workplace. For some unions organising beyond the workplace has involved becoming involved in campaigns that have broader community concerns. For example, the Transport Workers Union worked closely with the Concerned Families of Truckies' Campaign (Cooper, 2000: 585) and the Queensland Branch is currently running a Stop Road Rage Campaign.

To assess whether unions are using their websites to address issues that operate beyond the workplace the survey looked for content relating to community, political and professional issues as well as disputes involving other unions. Overall, the results suggest that websites are not used to promote broader industrial or community issues. Only twenty percent of unions provided information on disputes involving other unions. In half of these cases this information was provided through the inclusion of Workers' Online news stories, a LaborNet service that delivers the top five news stories to subscriber websites. Similarly unions have not embraced websites as a forum raising awareness of community or political issues. In the latter case, the only reference to political parties came through hyperlinks and in most cases this was merely part of long list on a 'useful links' page. A significant minority of websites presented content that could be related to professional development (this was taken to include trade training as well). While this could represent a bias in the data, with non-manual and professional unions more likely to present this information, a chi-square analysis did not show a significant difference between the frequency of this content on manual and non-manual union websites.

Discussion

The content analysis of Australian union websites suggests that unions are not exploiting the full benefits of web technology with respect to recruiting and organising members. While Australian unions have actively engaged with the Web, the goals and objectives that they wish to achieve from this engagement are not clear. In many cases a union appears to have a website because it can rather than identifying any clear purpose. This is common to many organisations, not just unions. Boczkowski concluded that on-line newspapers exist because of a fear of not have a Web presence rather than any assessment of the advantages of having one (Hine, 2001: 184). This accords with the assessment of Pizzigati *et al* (2002) that unions can become enamoured with the Internet and lose site of the goals and objectives that a website should address. Shostak (2002) labels these Cyber Drift unions, that is unions that utilise the new technology but without a clear purpose. Based on the results of the study reported in this paper, Australian unions would seem to fit this category.

In addition, the slow development of websites with respect to mobilising members around key disputes and campaigns and the limited use of discussion forums or directed feedback most likely reflects the limited spread of the organising model within Australian unions. (Cooper, 2001, 2002; Ellem, 2001; Griffin & Moors, 2002; Holland and Hanley, 2002). Consequently, while the organising model highlights various ways the Web can be used to support union renewal through mobilising members and providing resources and avenues for members input, we would expect practice to be lagging behind theory. It is noteworthy that the union websites with the most content related to mobilising and union democracy belong to unions that have embraced the organising model.

Similarly, the limited content devoted to social and political activism and international issues is most likely a reflection of the preoccupation of Australian unions with 'bread and butter' industrial issues. In an environment where unions are under increasing political pressure, the pursuit of non-industrial and international objectives poses difficulties.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the content of Australian union websites. Drawing upon a developing literature on the potential of ICTs to enhance union effectiveness and the literature on the organising model of unionism,

four types of website content were identified that could assist unions with recruiting and organising members. These four areas are recruitment, union democracy, mobilising members and beyond workplace issues. The overwhelming conclusion is that unions have not moved beyond using the Web for recruitment purposes. The survey results indicate most unions have ignored the organising potential of the Web. In many ways this result is not surprising given the slow and ad hoc diffusion of the organising model within Australia unions.

While this study has provided some useful insights into the way Australian unions are engaging with the Internet, further research is required to ascertain how a union's public persona on the Web is linked to their industrial and organising strategies. Indeed, we must ask to what extent is the Web and other Internet tools a part of a union's strategy at all. Hence, this study is only the first stage of a more extensive research project on the way unions are using information technology.

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