



What has Twitter taught trade unions about audience engagement?

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Trade unions in many countries have built considerable expertise in engaging with new audiences via social media. At the very least, the various platforms and accounts allow unions to increase the frequency of their communications and improve the reach of their messaging. Better still, some have been able to use their experience of social media platforms to support their organising strategies, including with regard to activism, engagement and mobilisation.

To understand the evolving relationship between trade unions and their digital audiences, Panos Panagiotopoulos, Senior Lecturer in Information Management at Queen Mary University of London and a Fellow of the Alan Turing Institute, carried out a mapping exercise of the Twitter accounts of TUC-affiliated trade unions in the UK in November 2021. Based on this, he gives recommendations for unions on how to interact more successfully with members. After looking at a large dataset of Tweets and information from a total of 357,687 'followers' of 32 union accounts, he also interviewed the union officials who manage those accounts.

Here are some findings on how unions use Twitter and who their followers are:

Unions use Twitter actively to address their members, or groups of members, and to invite them to participate in union activities. **Hashtags used regularly, around events, campaigns or actions, can maintain membership engagement and help connect members with each other and with other accounts run by the union.**

The analysis of the followers of union Twitter accounts, via network visualisations and the keywords they use in their own biographical descriptions, shows that unions are connecting with large and diverse audiences. On some occasions, these audiences far exceed unions' membership bases and extend to users outside their traditional geographic and workplace boundaries.

One important distinction, however, is between unions which are focused on activism and those which are focused on shared professional interests. The former tend to attract audiences within the trade union movement who support a range of diverse causes; the latter draw attention to professional and personal characteristics to connect with audiences that might, otherwise, have a weaker interest in trade unionism itself. It could be argued that these distinctions resemble differences between the organising and the servicing models of trade unionism, but the reality is more complex.

Twitter offers unions opportunities to combine diverse strategies and reach different audiences – its value as an advanced tool for broader stakeholder engagement, rather than for the direct participation of members, should not come as a surprise to union communicators.

These are the authors' recommendations for union communicators:

1. **Unions should pay special attention to changing the relationships they have with their digital audiences.** While audiences come from traditional members, they are also likely to include potential members and other social media users that have an interest in information on union activities. Unions need both to understand these users and to develop strategies on how to engage with them. For example, it may be easier for young professionals to follow a union account than join a union straightaway. By breaking this initial barrier to engagement, unions can consider effective pathways to convert that interest into membership or even to imagine new types of membership.
2. **Unions should think more about digital audiences both in terms of data as well as in relation to the broad characteristics they imagine them to have.** This means that, although unions might not fully understand who is on the other side of the screen, they can draft 'personas' in order to visualise groups of users by capturing the characteristics they have in common. Much can also be learned from social media monitoring tools from which unions can source useful content from their own followers as well as from other social media accounts.

Further details of the study can be read via the [full article](#) and its [open access version](#).

If one would like to read more on this topic, Panos Panagiotopoulos suggests reading [New Technology, Work and Employment \(July 2021\)](#), which contains a special selection of articles on the 'Internet, Social Media and Trade Union Revitalisation', edited by Torsten Geelan and Andy Hodder. The [introduction to the special issue](#) is exceptionally informative for researchers interested in how actors that constitute the trade union movement use digital technologies. Other articles in the special issue offer insights from Germany, Canada, USA and Australia, as well as from a comparative cross-European study.

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