

**#Unions:
Canadian Unions & Social Media**

by
Véronique Émond Sioufi

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Approval

Name: Véronique Émond Sioufi
Degree: Master of Arts (Communication)
Title: #Unions: Canadian Unions & Social Media
Examining Committee: **Chair:** David Murphy
Senior Lecturer

Enda Brophy
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

Robert Hackett
Supervisor
Professor

Kendra Strauss
External Examiner
Associate Professor
Labour Studies Program (Director)
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Date Defended/Approved: April 19, 2018

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Abstract

By changing the connectivity between people across the globe, the rise of social media has shifted the resources and capacities of political activists, opening up new horizons for social movements. Many of the labour movement's renewal goals—such as improving equity within unions, adopting more inclusive grassroots organizing, and reaching out to a precarious, fragmented workforce—seem to line up with this open potential of social media. However, existing research on unions' use of social media suggests the goals and practice don't align, arguing that unions tend to use social media in a unidirectional, centralized way. To explore this discord, this study investigates the use of social media by four of Canada's largest labour organizations—the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW), Unifor Canada, and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). In comparing the strategies expressed in interviews with key communications staff and the practices evident in the unions' social media output with the stated principles and goals of the organizations as a whole, a number of tensions between labour communications and social media platforms become evident. On the one hand, unions struggle in maintaining centrally controlled messaging in a context that favours open, pluralistic communications. On the other hand, while social media has become an essential arena for public discourse, it's one where the connectivity it offers is manipulated by algorithms created in the interest of private profit. There is a clear and compelling need to strengthen Canadian unions in order to address growing economic inequality, and by filling gaps in the research of unions' current communication strategies, this study can contribute to efforts to formulate some best practices for using social media as a democratic tool in the Canadian labour movement.

Keywords: Unions; Canadian labour movement; social media; digital organizing.

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Sylvia Sioufi, who inspired this research through the example she set in her committed and tireless work in the Canadian labour movement.

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List of Acronyms

CALM	Canadian Association of Labour Media
CLC	Canadian Labour Congress
CUPE	Canadian Union of Public Employees
ESDC	Employment and Social Development Canada
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NDP	New Democratic Party
UFCW	United Food and Commercial Workers
WTO	World Trade Organization

Preface

Can Unions Save Millennials?

What is this thing Trudeau is talking about, and what can it do for me?

November 16, 2015

I know, we're not supposed to talk about the potential benefits of organized labour in the mainstream media. Unions have been part of the taboo lexicon since the Reagan and Thatcher era – since before I, and my Millennial generation, was born. Even the NDP, the labour movement's supposed partner, hardly mentions unions or uses any terminology that might brand them as radicals (you know, things like 'the working class' or 'capitalism'). Because, for my entire life, mentioning something like workers' rights is totally super left fringe speak. You just don't go there. So it's not a big surprise that those of us in this method-of-organizing-that-shall-not-be-named generation are not really thinking about what the labour movement has to do with anything. They're for miners and autoworkers and the Hell's Angels, right? They're not on our radar, I'm not sure if we're on their radar, and hell, sometimes even the very few of us that are unionized don't even know it.

But now all of a sudden Justin Trudeau is talking about unions (like, in a good way).

So technically Trudeau is Gen-X but he's so handsome and charming that we Millennials are happy to have him represent us too. Ok, perhaps we didn't have particularly strong Liberal party leanings and we mostly just wanted to get rid of Stephen Harper, but there was something appealing in Trudeau's youth and openness and it often felt like he was campaigning directly to our generation (especially when he talked about weed). But then there was this other thing he talked about that didn't seem to have anything to do with us: unions. During his campaign he said, "as Liberals, it is our fundamental belief that unions have, and continue to play, an integral role in the growth and strength of the middle class in this country." Wait, unions? A pretty weird thing to say on behalf of a party that's been the Canadian neoliberal team captain on more than one occasion. Maybe he was throwing a shout out to some coal miners for a few extra votes. But then, just a few days after being sworn in, he addressed the Canadian Labour Congress. *No prime minister has done this in over 50 years.* He had already won the election at this

point, so what gives? It was a closed meeting but there's no stopping those sweet Trudeau sound bites from making it to Twitter, which ran along the lines of, "the labour movement is not the problem, it's the solution." He said he looks forward to a "long and productive relationship" with the labour movement, and he renewed promises to repeal bills C-377 and C-525 (part of Harper's anti-union legacy). He's at the CLC, talking to labour leaders, about unions being a GOOD thing. This is a pretty big deal, right? Is it just me, or is this more radical than his pitch to legalize pot?

Unions should (cautiously) take advantage?

The reporting on this event definitely made it feel like it must just be me. To see what people in the labour-know were saying about this crazy thing, I went over to rabble.ca (where they're allowed to talk about unions) and read Nora Loreto's blog post where on the one hand she urged labour to "harness the spirit of the honeymoon phase" with Trudeau, and "use the progressive optimism that launched Trudeau into power," that "excitement that labour and the NDP failed to capitalize on," and on the other hand she warned that "labour leaders must welcome this era with extreme caution" because the Liberals will likely break their promises (we're still in the grips of neoliberalism, right?). Ok, this seems like an appropriately sobering response to a Beatlemania-like excitement for organized labour's new potential future. Only, there was no Beatlemania-like excitement. I may have spotted an exclamation mark or two on Twitter, but there was just as much caution as enthusiasm. And on my Facebook feed full of broke Millennials looking for hope that we might be able to own our own homes and get our cavities filled one day? Nothing.

I'm almost 30, a graduate student with a corresponding amount of debt, your typically dismal Millennial job prospects to face after this degree, and *I've never heard my prime minister say that unions might offer me a solution*. And it wasn't just Trudeau, the IMF said the same thing too (yes, the same IMF that brought us structural adjustment). In March the IMF advocated the revival of unions as an effective way for countries to expand their economies and boost productivity. The IMF's ongoing research demonstrates that the dramatic increase in income inequality since the 1980s in advanced economies such as Canada's has been concurrent with a decline in union strength and membership, and argues that increases in unionization will both address the problem of unequal distribution of wealth and revitalize economic stagnation.

Say that again?

Where's the kaboom? There was supposed to be an earth-shattering kaboom.

So the IMF is saying unions are good, the Liberals run on a platform to increase spending at the expense of having a deficit – and then WIN the election: what is going on here? I feel like I am living in an alternate reality to the one I've known my whole life (you know, the one where taxes are bad, deficits are bad, unions are bad). There's no way that I'm witnessing the dismantling of the dogma around unions. Like, this can't really be a shift from strict capitalist ideology, to a genuine broader understanding that the social is an investment, can it? This is a pretty drastic change in tone and language, one that could almost be mistaken for an opening up of civil society. No way. But maybe, beyond the possibility that Trudeau is just a charmer, the fact that he is talking about unions in a positive way at all, and engaging with labour leaders as though that's what he's supposed to do, he is legitimizing their existence? And in legitimizing their existence he goes at least a small degree to legitimizing their goals. So, what are their goals? How are unions going to save the middle class? And what happened to the working class? (Because most Millennials sure don't look middle class to me).

And most importantly: can unions save Millennials?

So maybe unions aren't on the extreme fringes anymore, they no longer have to live on the defensive, or fight for their very existence, so what now? How does this collective bargaining thing work? And how do we precariously-employed Millennials get in on it?

Is there an app for that?

Chapter 1.

Introduction: Unions, Social Media, and Digital Public Discourse

EDNA. Joe, get wise. Maybe get your buddies together, maybe go on strike for better money. Poppa it is during the war and they won out. I'm turning into a sour old nag.

JOE. (Defending himself.) Strikes don't work!

EDNA. Who told you?

JOE. Besides that means not a nickel a week while we're out. Then when it's over they don't take you back.

EDNA. Suppose they don't! What's to lose?

JOE. Well, we're averaging six-seven dollars a week now.

EDNA. That just pays the rent.

JOE. That is something, Edna.

EDNA. It isn't. They'll push you down to three and four a week before you know it. Then you'll say, "That's somethin'," too!

JOE. There's too many cabs on the streets, that's the whole damn trouble.

EDNA. Let the company worry about that, you big fool! If their cabs didn't make a profit, they'd take them off the streets. Or maybe you think they're in business just to pay Joe Mitchell's rent!

JOE. You don't know a-b-c-, Edna.

EDNA. I know this – your boss is making suckers outa you boys every minute. Yes, and suckers out of all the wives and the poor innocent kids who'll grow up with crooked spines and sick bones. Sure, I see the paper, how good orange juice is for kids. But damn it our kids get colds one on top of the other. They look like little ghosts. Betty never saw a grapefruit. I took her to the store last week and she pointed to a stake of grapefruits. "What's that!" she said. My God, Joe – the world is supposed to be for all of us.

This is a fragment of a conversation in Clifford Odets 1935 play *Waiting for Lefty*, the story of a group of New York cab drivers who are planning a strike against their employer. It was a familiar story to Odets' working-class audience who were living through the depression and knew firsthand that the promises of prosperity that had grown during the 1920s were not going to be fulfilled. What made *Waiting for Lefty* so popular was, in large part, that a significant narrative had developed concerning the success of capitalism in the post war period, but the depression reminded working-class people that they weren't among society's real stakeholders, but rather they were little more than fodder for business, foot-soldiers in the battle for profits which benefited them little.

Edna's message to her cabdriver husband is that most dangerous of sentiments: we have nothing to lose. The real, working-class people who were represented by Odets' characters had seen (or at least understood) the horrors of the First World War, and they also were well aware of just how much wealth was being produced by the society around them. But, most importantly, they knew that they were not the recipients of that wealth and they never would be unless they began to fight for a stake in the prosperity.

What *Waiting for Lefty*, and its popularity among the working-class, represented was an important shift in culture taking place in North America and elsewhere, the formation of a narrative that society wasn't just for the wealthy but should benefit everyone. When Edna tells her husband that the bosses were making "suckers" out of him and his fellow workers, she was reflecting a growing sentiment that working people had the right to fight for a stake in the wealth that seemed to be reserved for so few. These turbulent and restless feelings formed the ground of what became known as the Popular Front.

1.1. The Popular Front

Based in the United States but extending into Canada, the Popular Front was a broad coalition of working-class groups and individuals that expanded in the 1930s and pushed for greater rights and better wages for working people. More than a simple political movement, the Popular Front represented a cultural shift, a deep-seated change in ideology and worldview that was manifesting itself not only in the growth of union

consciousness but in various cultural movements, like popular theatre, and countless artifacts, like novels and magazines, that were creating a powerful challenge to the prevailing hegemony (Denning, 1996).

In *The Cultural Front*, Michael Denning (1996) traces the cultural production that accompanied the political formation of the Popular Front movement, suggesting that what he calls the Cultural Front “was not simply the product of individual political commitment: it was [...] the result of the encounter between a powerful democratic social movement—the Popular Front—and the modern cultural apparatuses of mass entertainment and education” (pp. xvii-xviii). The crux of Denning’s thesis is that the political sentiments of the Popular Front occurred against the backdrop of a significant cultural transformation among working people, one that carried the message of democratic and social radicalism into every corner of society.

The similarities between the historical moment studied by Denning and the contemporary conditions of our own sociopolitical milieu are striking. The political radicalism advocated by the Popular Front was a response to a drastically changing economic situation in which the types and nature of employment were expanding, largely as a result of industrialization in numerous sectors. This expansion had knock-on effects in the culture industries which became, in part, the voice of those represented by the Popular Front. In a relatively short period of time a working-class message became part of the public discourse, and working people began to see their interests represented in theatre, magazines, novels, illustrations, posters, education, and even film (such as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* and John Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath*). The awareness of class issues that the Cultural Front helped to foster was itself an important impetus to the gradual growth in unionization and labour militancy, particularly in the new cultural industries.

Over the past two decades in North America we have seen the return of conditions similar to those which inspired the rise of the Popular Front, including radical growth in economic inequality, a relative impoverishment of working people, a decline in union membership, significant occupational shifts, and major changes in the gender and racial makeup of the working-class. Moreover, these changes are taking place against the backdrop of monumental shifts in media, including the decline in traditional print and television media and the rapid expansion in large enterprises associated with new media such as Google and Amazon, and what seems to be a genuine expansion of public

discourse through social media,¹ with serious implications concerning how people see themselves in the current economic and political context. Transformation in employment associated with informational industries will surely have long term impacts on the principles of organizing and promoting labour issues.

The rise of the Cultural Front is a fascinating historical case in itself, but what makes it particularly interesting is the degree to which the conditions which provoked this broad-based, labour-focused social movement parallel our current situation. And if the Cultural Front played a significant part in the rise of class consciousness and unionization, it is tempting to imagine how the rise of a networked media system—an expansion that potentially gives a voice to millions of working people who would not have had the same access to the public sphere only a decade or two ago—could have a similar impact. Whether or to what degree the new media will, like the rise of the mass media system of the 1930s and 1940s, set the stage for a new kind of cultural front and a serious shift in ideology remains to be seen. However, the significant cultural shift represented by the expansion of the internet and social media certainly presents the possibility for a new kind of public discourse and the creation of a new cultural front.

The economic conditions for this shift have been unfolding for some time as the labour movement has been in significant decline in Canada for several decades, during which time inequality has grown and precarious employment has spread (Statistics Canada, 2017a, c). As though on cue to feed the creation of a new cultural front, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have, in recent years, argued that a revival of unions can be an effective way for Canada to address income inequality and overcome economic stagnation (Jaumotte and Buitron, 2015; Pitcher, 2015). Within this context, academic research has suggested that social media can be an important way for unions to increase their strength and influence (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015). Furthermore, social movements such as #Occupy, #IdleNoMore, and #MeToo have demonstrated the power that the use of social media campaigns can have in shifting culture, public discourse, and state policy. It appears as though the communicative potential of social media could be an ideal avenue for changing the

¹ Websites and applications that allow users to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

discourse around labour issues, communicating with members, and reaching out to a precarious and dispersed workforce.

Despite the claim from many researchers that unions have been too slow in their uptake of social media (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015; Sipp, 2016), it appears that Canadian unions have been actively using social media as a standard part of their communication repertoire for the past decade. For this reason, the more relevant question for scholars is arguably no longer “*whether* unions are using digital media?” but rather “*how* are unions using digital media?”

To investigate this question in the Canadian context, this study looks at the use of social media by the country’s three largest unions, the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Unifor Canada, and the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW), as well as the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), a national lobby group for the Canadian labour movement. The research consists of five interviews with communications officers, communications directors, and executives, whose responsibilities relate to the union’s social media output, as well as a look at these organizations’ posts on Facebook and Twitter over the span of two months, from July to September 2017. The goal of this research is to explore how social media practices are being integrated into the activities and goals of the established labour movement in Canada, by comparing the goals and strategies expressed in the interviews, and the practices evident in the unions’ social media engagement.

To situate this investigation, this study opens with a review of Canadian union renewal literature, existing studies of unions’ use of social media, and research concerning the use of social media by social movements. While Canadian union renewal literature mostly ignores the potential benefits of online organizing, the research does offer some broad renewal goals against which these unions’ social media practice can be compared. And while there are almost no studies of Canadian unions’ use of social media, the few studies that have been conducted of the use of social media by unions internationally (e.g. Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Paniagiotopolous and Barnett, 2015) point to some common struggles unions face in online organizing. A look at some of the strategies in digital organizing by social movements might offer some clues as to

whether and how Canadian unions can improve the effectiveness of their social media communications.

There is a clear and compelling need to strengthen Canadian unions in order to address growing economic inequality. By filling gaps in the research of unions' current communication strategies, this study can contribute to efforts to formulate some best practices for using social media as a democratic tool in the Canadian labour movement.

1.2. The Canadian Labour Movement

Unions have a historically important role as social justice advocates in the community—having fought for such reforms as public health care, education, pension plans, and employment insurance (Ross et al., 2015)—and their power has relied both on strength in numbers and a concurrent narrative capacity, “the ability of a movement to frame its story on its own terms, to spread its worldview” (Tufekci, 2017, p. 176). However, the labour movement has been in significant decline for several decades due to a range of interrelated processes: union density is diminishing, labour precarity is expanding, and the workforce is increasingly fragmented (Camfield, 2011). Union density in Canada has fallen from 38% in 1981 to 30% in 2015 (Statistics Canada, 2017c). This structural decline has been expedited by the legislative and judicial measures of federal and provincial governments with neoliberal agendas,² with the biggest decreases in unionization rates in Canada occurring during the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, and again after the financial crisis in 2008 due to loss of public service jobs (Adams, 2005; Ross et al., 2015; Statistics Canada, 2017c). These governments failed to uphold their commitments to the United Nation’s International Labour Organization, which has cited Canada as one of the world’s worst violators of basic labour rights due to its government’s strike-breaking actions and arbitrarily imposed contract settlements (Adams, 2005). Compounding the situation, the traditional social democratic party, the New Democratic Party (NDP) has consciously distanced itself from the labour movement during this period (Camfield, 2011).

² “Rooted in classical liberal economic thought, neoliberalism claims that a largely unregulated capitalist economy embodies the ideal of free individual choice and maximizes economic efficiency and growth, technological progress, and distributive justice” (Parekh & Wilcox, 2014).

The increased income inequality and job precarity that has expanded alongside this union decline (Statistics Canada 2017a, c) suggests a pressing need for union renewal in Canada. However, the method and path of this renewal remains unclear, particularly in light of the effects of a nearly entirely lost younger generation of workers. A significant challenge in this regard seems to relate to how Canadian unions might market themselves to the largest part of the Canadian work force—those aged 15-35, often dubbed Millennials (Statistics Canada, 2017b)—that has come of age in a political context in which unions are regularly portrayed at best as unnecessary, at worst as corrupt and malevolent, or are simply not addressed in public discourse at all. These youngest working Canadians currently experience the highest rates of job precarity (Statistics Canada, 2017b), and the lowest rates of union representation, with those aged 17-24 at a dismal 14.8%, followed by those aged 25-34 at 28.4%, comparable to unionization rates of 36% for Canadians aged 45-64 (Statistics Canada, 2017c).

While the Canadian uptake of movements such as #occupy, #idlenomore, or #metoo would suggest that there is an ideological consciousness among a sizable number of youth in Canada concerning the need for change to the economic and political status quo, the Canadian labour movement has not, as yet, been able to capitalize on this growing trend.

1.3. The Digital Public Sphere

Scholars have suggested that social media can be an important way for unions to increase their strength and influence in this period of potential renewal (Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Sipp, 2016). Given the successes that many social movements and political campaigns have enjoyed by utilizing and appealing to the power that social media can have in shifting public discourse and state policy (Haggart, 2013; Tufekci, 2017), the effort to potentially engage a new generation of workers in the labour movement through the use of digital media seems to be a reasonable and promising course of action for Canadian unions. The communicative potential of social media could be an ideal avenue for changing the discourse around labour issues and reaching out to a precarious and dispersed workforce.

Spheres of public discourse expand and contract according to the degree to which avenues of reciprocal communication are available to individuals and groups at any

given moment. The now commonly used phrase “the public sphere” has come to refer to spaces (both physical and technologically manufactured) in which people are free, more or less, to openly express their interests and construct norms and common collective intentions.³ These discussions, and the norms that are perceived to grow from them, can stand in opposition to prevailing hegemony, support prevailing ideologies, or exist anywhere on the continuum between these two possibilities. Given the degree to which the owners of the means of communication can control and manipulate information and the conduits through which it moves, there are good reasons for scepticism about the openness and power of the public sphere to oppose established hegemonic power. However, significant technological innovations have affected changes in the contours of the space in which public discourse occurs by changing the form and amount of connectivity between members of a society. Even if one is sceptical of the receptivity and fairness of public discourse, shifts in the channels of connectivity have nonetheless opened up new vistas for the so-called public sphere, as well as presented new challenges for the hegemonic control of accepted norms. The internet is one example of technology which has drastically increased people’s access to each other and their ability to communicate with one another.

Social media platforms have become central arenas of public discourse. The world’s largest social media platform at present is Facebook with over 2 billion active monthly users as of January 2018 (Statista, 2018a). Other social media platforms also have vast user bases, with Reddit at 1.7 billion, YouTube at 1.5 billion, Instagram at 800 million, and Twitter at 330 million active monthly users (ibid.). Over 22 million Canadians are active users of social networking sites (Statista, 2018d). While Trudeau posing for Instagram selfies might not seem to constitute noteworthy political discourse, U.S. President Donald Trump discussing military action on Twitter certainly does. In 2015, #CDNpoli, a hashtag which tracks conversations about Canadian politics across social media platforms, was the most widely used Twitter hashtag in Canada and it continues

³ “The public sphere” is a term originally used by Jürgen Habermas (1962/1989) in his influential text *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Though Habermas was reflecting on the public sphere in a specific historical context, the term has, since the publication of his book, been widely used to refer to areas of public debate which are open to all citizens concerning issues of general interest. A significant body of work exists concerning the formation, the limits, and even the existence of a meaningful public sphere; however, for the purposes at hand this study assumes that public debates do, indeed, occur through various social avenues, and that digital social media have, arguably, become a predominant area of such public discourse.

to be used at a rate of roughly 80 unique tweets per hour. Most government officials in Canada have active Twitter accounts through which they discuss public policy with Canadians online (Beeby, 2018). The spread of social media has been so ubiquitous that it is no longer reasonable to think of it as a separate realm that is conceptually detachable from the individuals and institutions that use it.

Though they may begin from a position of disadvantage, individuals and institutions which stand in some way in opposition to powerful political and economic interests continually insert themselves into public discourse. Institutions like unions, for example, in an effort to challenge social assumptions such as the superiority of private sector enterprise or the inevitability of inequality, seek to play an important role in public discourse and act as an ideological counterweight to hegemonic ideas marking capitalism. However, any effort to offer a recusant narrative concerning the prevailing assumptions of capitalist ideology is significantly hampered by the controls exercised by the ruling class over the most dynamic and dominant communication conduits that have traditionally been available to those seeking access to the public discourse. Though a thorough notion of the public sphere would by no means be limited to traditional and widely accessed communicative media such as, for example, television and newspapers, it is these media that undoubtedly have had the most direct and powerful influence over ideology in the public sphere in the past. The corporate concentration of mass media has marginalized a great deal of alternative ideological discourse, and the social goals of unions have seen their ideas lose traction over the past two or three decades (Kumar, 2007; Martin, 2004). However, while concentration of ownership in the so-called mass-media may have pushed unions to the margins of the public sphere, social media arguably offer new openings for unions to step in and take on a more visible role in public discourse. Efforts by unions to hold governments and corporations accountable concerning exploitation and inequality have potentially been given new life in light of the revolution of the public sphere that appears to be taking place with the radical expansion of internet communication.

However, thus far the impact that unions have been able to have on the public sphere through the use of social media seems to be extremely limited, an issue that has been surprisingly under-addressed in the literature on the changing shape of unions in the digital age, as the following chapter will address. It is unclear to what degree this limited impact has been the result of shortcomings in the operations or activities of

unions themselves versus the drawbacks and limitations inherent in networked media as they are currently structured. There is little question that social media, for example, are subject to many of the same market limitations which affect traditional mass-media, limitations which will be explored in the following chapters. In other words, it is also possible that the potential for social media to impact the public sphere in terms of discursive openness may have been over estimated.

1.4. Canadian Unions in a Digital Public Sphere

While the question of how corporations, political campaigns, and social movements use social media has been well researched, there are only a handful of studies that investigate labour movement presence on digital platforms. The first part of this study is a literature review which aims to a) reach an understanding of the broader academic conversation concerning Canadian union renewal in order to better situate an inquiry on Canadian unions' use of social media within this context; b) outline the literature concerning unions' engagement with social media's networking and communication capabilities; and c) explore some of the research on the use of social media in social movements, against which Canadian unions' use of social media can be compared.

A comparison of the literature on Canadian union renewal and the literature on social media use in social movements points to consistency between the fundamental principles of social justice and unity that unions claim to represent, the renewal goals identified for unions in the scholarly literature, and the potentials of social media. However, existing research on unions' use of social media points to inconsistency between various union renewal goals and many aspects of union social media practice. The second part of this study adds to our knowledge in this area, describing the primary research conducted in order to explore the potential reasons for this inconsistency between principles, goals, and practice. This study focuses on the operations of CUPE, Unifor, UFCW, and the CLC, comparing the principles laid out in these unions' constitutions with the goals and strategies expressed by key communication staff in interviews and the actual practice of these unions on the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter.

One of the key findings and central tensions that emerges out of this investigation is that between the hierarchical and centrally controlled structure of unions on the one hand and the more horizontal and participatory design of social media on the other. This tension can be seen in the fact that there is an antithesis between attempts to centrally control messaging on a platform that appears to depend on a plurality of contributing voices. Conversely, interviews conducted for this thesis suggest the corporate ownership of social media makes some union staff uncomfortable about using these platforms for organizing. This discomfort speaks to a tension within social media itself, between a democratic, open, organically emerging medium, and a centralizing medium in which corporations are playing an increasingly powerful role. While the connectivity that social media offer would seem to line up perfectly with the communication and organizing needs of unions, unions continue to face ideological and political onslaughts, to which their social media engagement potentially leaves them more exposed, and this could hinder their ability to take advantage of its benefits. Thus, on the one hand, unions struggle in maintaining centrally controlled messaging in a context that favours open, pluralistic communications. And on the other hand, while social media has become an essential arena for public discourse, it's one where the connectivity it offers is manipulated by algorithms created in the interest of private profit and corporations.

How political and social ideas are shaped in the digital public sphere is a complicated question, even when issues such as the degree of media ownership or the presence of hegemonic ideas are relatively straightforward to determine, particularly given issues such as hidden algorithms which have direct and profound effects on how people get information and how the information that they relay gets seen by others. How social media might operate within, and have impact on, the labour movement and public discourse is accordingly also complex, and even the most thorough effort to follow the impact of social media use by unions would not necessarily be able to identify straightforward models of causality and impact. Nonetheless, smaller-scale investigations of social media use such as this study can at least hope to contribute to a wider effort to conceptualize what role social media are playing in the formation of political perspectives and narratives going forward.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review: Situating a Study of Canadian Unions' Use of Social Media

2.1. Introduction

Even before the interoperability of Web 2.0,⁴ many academics recognized the potential benefit of the internet's networking capabilities for the labour movement (Diamond and Freeman, 2002; Lee, 2000). However, the recognition of this potential failed to crystalize into serious research on the issue over the next decade and a half. In their 2015 study on the University and College Union's use of Twitter, Andy Hodder and David Houghton of the University of Birmingham's Business School offered a fairly stark portrait of the relative poverty of research that has been conducted on the digital era communication strategies of unions: "The importance of the Internet to trade unionism has not gone unnoticed by academics, and while many have perceived the need for unions to engage in social media, *there has not been any study of how unions use social media*" (2015, p. 173, emphasis added). While there have in fact been a handful of such studies, it would appear that academics have gone from an occasional call to action on the issue to merely the odd rebuke on the lack of uptake by unions of online communication. Thus, while unions are accused of having lagged behind many other institutions in their use of digital media (Sipp, 2016), researchers have concurrently failed to investigate the nature of this apparent deficiency. When compared to the wealth of research on the use of social media by corporations, political campaigns, and social movements, both this apparent lack of uptake of social media by unions and the shortage of research on unions' use of social media, seem especially glaring.

The first section of this chapter summarizes the academic research concerning Canadian union renewal (e.g., Briskin, 2011; Camfield, 2011; Foley and Baker, 2010; Ross et al., 2015) in order to better situate a project on Canadian unions' use of social

⁴ "Web 2.0 is a term that was introduced in 2004 and refers to the second generation of the World Wide Web. [...] However, Web 2.0 does not refer to a specific version of the Web, but rather a series of technological improvements" (Christensson, 2008). These improvements included more user-friendly web pages and applications that required less expertise and provided platforms for more user-generated content such as blogs, wikis, and social networking (e.g. MySpace) (ibid.).

media within this context. While much of the Canadian union renewal literature ignores the potentials of digital era organizing, the proposed renewal goals seem at the very least to be compatible with the promises of social media. Thus, this literature is useful because it can possibly offer us a set of goals against which Canadian unions' use of social media can be measured.

The second section of this chapter steps outside of the Canadian context and outlines the literature concerning unions' engagement with the internet's networking and communication capabilities. Though there was early optimism concerning the internet's networking capabilities for union organizing (e.g. Diamond and Freeman, 2002; Fiorito and Bass, 2002; Fiorito et al., 2002; Greene et al., 2003; Lucio, 2003), over the next few decades researchers found that unions were not using these capabilities to their full potential (e.g. Aalto-Matturi, 2005; Diamond and Freeman, 2007; Lucio and Walker, 2005; Lucio, Trevorrow, and Walker, 2009; Ward and Lusoli, 2003). The few studies that have investigated unions' use of social media (e.g. Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Fowler and Hagar, 2013; Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Milner, 2012; Panagiotopoulos, 2012; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015) point to a need for unions to reform their hierarchical and centralized operational structures in order to make more effective use of these online platforms, however these authors also acknowledge that more research needs to be done in order to draw such conclusions.

The final section of this chapter explores some of the research on the use of social media in social movements, against which Canadian unions' use of social media can be compared. While the initial hopes of social media ushering in an era of Habermasian deliberative democracy now seem overly optimistic (e.g. Katz, 1995; Wheeler, 1997), the literature points to the potential for social media to create new openings for political engagement by making it accessible through smaller contributions, a wider exchange of information, and a new personalized form of politics (e.g. Carty, 2015; Castells, 2007, 2012; Haggart, 2013; Margetts et al., 2016; Tufekci, 2017). But, more than this, some see social media as an instigator of a new kind of awareness of political engagement itself, one that could potentially change how people see society and their place in it (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Tufekci, 2017; van Dijck and Poell, 2013). These academics consider this as portending a cultural shift in political engagement, one which unions could take advantage of, but which union renewal literature seems to fail to recognize or engage.

Looked at all together, this body of literature points to the need to further investigate whether and why tensions appear to exist between unions, their goals and operations, and the operations and capabilities of social media in a context in which one might assume that all signs should point to cohesion. This is a question that will be taken up in the next chapter.

2.2. Canadian Union Renewal Literature

As the introductory chapter outlined, unions offer a counter-weight to the unchecked pursuit of accumulation by employers and corporations through strength in numbers and ideological influence. However, these two union capacities have waned as unions in Canada have seen a 20% decrease in membership since the 1980s (Statistics Canada, 2017c) amid a concurrent rise in neoliberal ideology promoting free markets and flexible work. Though it is not clear if this trend can be checked or reversed, if the parallel outlined in the introduction between the era of the cultural front and today's shifting socioeconomic situation hold, there may be some political openings for reviving the union movement in Canada. Furthermore, these openings may be indicative of the emergence of a new cultural front, something that unions may access and take part in through new opportunities via the expanding social media.

Both the issue of unions' uses of social media and the research surrounding them have gained in importance as the Canadian labour movement has grappled with this decline and, more recently, possible opportunities for renewal. Though any potential shift toward a more dynamic and influential union movement will demand a wide range of transformations, a key assumption of this thesis is that the success of any potential renewal relies, at least in part, on both the roles that labour activists play and the contributions that academics can offer concerning the uses of digital media. However, as this literature review suggests, as of yet both of these potential contributions have been wanting.

In 2006, Pradeep Kumar and Christopher Schenk reviewed a decade's worth of Canadian union renewal literature and found that this literature pointed to unions needing to: develop new organizing strategies; adapt bargaining practices to the needs of a more diverse workforce; focus more energy on community engagement, mobilization, and public lobbying; affect structural changes to empower the rank and file;

build solidarity with social movements; and effect a “worker-centred view of the world so as to become a catalyst of progressive social and economic change” (p. 36). A comparison of Kumar and Schenk’s (2006) survey to the most recent literature outlined below shows that many of the union renewal strategies advocated by scholars have remained the same over the past two decades; and despite the rapid growth of social media as a communicative tool, it has simply remained absent from the conversation.

In *Unions, Equity, and the Path to Renewal*, Janice Foley and Patricia Baker (2010) bring together a collection of essays that argue that forms of equity, such as racial and gender equity, are the central prerequisite for union renewal. These studies point to the contrast between the increasing diversity of the Canadian labour force and the continuing lack of representation of these demographics in the mostly older white male union leadership. In *Canadian Labour in Crisis*, David Camfield (2011) echoes this push for equity, complaining that unions in Canada are “pale and stale [and] usually male” (p. 92). Camfield argues that this demographic makeup of union leadership contributes to its culture of treating members “like children” and its inability to “inspire people to devote their time and energy to labour’s cause” or even educate the public on “the underlying causes of the assault on wages, benefits, rights and public services and how to fight back” (pp. 92-101). In “Union Renewal, Postheroic Leadership, and Women’s Organizing,” Linda Briskin (2011) further examines this link between union renewal and union leadership, positing that the dominant notions of leadership in the labour movement “impede the diversification of leadership demographics and the union-renewal project” (p. 509).

In *Building a Better World*, Stephanie Ross et al. (2015) argue that it is internal structural problems which contribute to Canadian unions’ lack of consideration for “organizing new kinds of jobs and workplaces” (p. 164). The unemployed, underemployed, and precariously employed—a group often dubbed the precariat (Standing, 2011)—“have not traditionally been the labour movement’s main target, and the established models of organizing don’t easily apply” (Ross et al., 2015, p. 168). Ross et al. suggest that by adopting social unionism, a model which forges stronger ties with social justice movements and “organizes communities around a range of issues beyond the workplace as a means of challenging the operation of the market” (Tufts, 2009, p. 980), Canadian unions would better represent these groups at the intersection of many social justice issues.

However, others argue that social unionism has already been taken up by many established Canadian unions, such as CUPE and the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), and that it has failed to revitalize the Canadian labour movement due to unions' "hierarchical and conciliatory bargaining model for action" and "paternalistic relation with social movements," among other factors (Shantz, 2009, p. 114). Some have therefore put forward still other models of unionism (e.g. Keenan, 2015; Tufts, 2009). In "Hospitality unionism and labour market adjustment: Toward Schumpeterian unionism?" Steven Tufts (2009) argues that "much of the labour union renewal literature remains prescriptive and is only beginning to escape false binaries such as business versus social unionism, the servicing versus organizing model, or 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up' administration" (p. 980). Tufts proposes instead a Schumpeterian model which focuses on more situated networks, strategic campaigns and alliances, and tactical cooperation. Whereas social unionism remains "very much integrated into capitalist production," Schumpeterian unionism "preserves working-class agency by adapting to successive rounds of economic 'creative destruction'" (Tufts, 2009, pp. 980-81). Derek Keenan (2015) explores the possibilities of another model situated outside of these 'false binaries' in "Is Another Unionism Possible? Solidarity Unionism in the Industrial Workers of the World in the U.S. and Canada." Associated with the work of Staughton Lynd, what Keenan calls solidarity unionism has at its core an ethos of familial bond rather than contractual obligation—a solidarity in which "an injury to one is an injury to all" (Keenan, 2015, pp. 213-14).

All together, these recent works suggest that in order to renew themselves, Canadian unions need to democratize their internal structures to achieve equity and better represent Canada's diverse workforce, expand their education and outreach efforts to include the precariat, and move towards new models of organizing that build alliances with international social movements and local community organizations.

The aspects of union renewal outlined above such as equity, outreach, and networking imply a kind of communitarian pressure for unions to no longer exist simply as bodies of trade representation of a select group of workers, but to move towards

operating with an intersectional⁵ lens of wider social interests of which workplace justice is only one part. In other words, in order to better represent their own membership, this literature suggests unions need to expand their role as social justice advocates in the broader community. However, in a movement made up of widely varied organizations with differing institutional approaches, tasked with representing very distinct memberships, and faced with constantly shifting ‘on the ground’ realities—there is not going to be community consensus on the role of unions in the public sphere, nor by extension in any research that is done concerning the issue.

Be this as it may, even the most basic aspects of any renewal effort on the part of unions—for example, the goal of increasing the percentage of the workforce that belongs to a union—requires at the very least an outreach strategy that makes effective use of social media. While this ability for social media to function as a mobilizing tool will be further examined in the review of the literature concerning social movements’ use of social media, the rare mentions of social media in the Canadian union renewal literature provide some examples of this capacity within the labour movement.

In “Raising Retail: Organizing Retail Workers in Canada and the United States,” Kendra Coulter (2013) examines various innovative organizing strategies taking place in the North American retail sector. In outlining some of the successes of the 2010 OUR Walmart campaign, Coulter notes, “local efforts are bolstered by vibrant web and social media strategies that link workers with one another and communicate actions to the broader network of supporters” (2013, p. 54). In a 2015 case study comparing how two Quebec unions “integrate issues of concern to young members” (p. 418), Mélanie Dufour-Poirier and Mélanie Laroche find that “in order to boost participation among young members, there was a need to use everyday language in contacts with them and increase the opportunities for such contact in a flexible and informal way, ideally with activists of their own age, *particularly through social media*” (p. 424, emphasis added). In “Understanding Union Power: Resources and Capabilities for Renewing Union Capacity,” Christian Lévesques and Gregor Murray (2010) draw on existing union

⁵ Intersectionality is a theory that examines the intersection of structural identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality vis à vis interlocking systems of power—positing, for example, that the issues black women face cannot be separated into either race or gender, but are both simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2014). Applying the theory of intersectionality to labour, this Canadian union renewal literature suggests a need for unions to ‘uncompartmentalize’ their work and address social issues in their multifaceted nature.

renewal research to assess the strength, resources, and strategic capabilities central to union capacity building. They argue “that unions pursuing innovations in the way that they organize their infrastructural resources were influenced by narrative frames seeking to enlarge labour market solidarities for all workers” (p. 340). These innovations included the use of social media (Lévesques and Murray, 2010, p. 340). The passing discussions of social media in the renewal literature mentioned here already point to the potential it has for connecting workers to the union, to each other, and to the broader community.

2.3. Literature on Union Use of Social Media

This general lack of information and research concerning labour’s use of social media within Canada makes it necessary to expand the scope of any review beyond the Canadian context alone. In international research, there has been some, although limited, academic focus on how the networking capabilities of the internet might serve the labour movement. The recognition of the internet’s networking capabilities for union organizing emerged early on in the life of the internet. Activists were among the earliest adopters of the internet (Tufekci, 2017) and the labour movement was no exception. Even before the 1999 anti-corporate globalization demonstrations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle called attention to digital organizing as a relevant topic of academic research, unions had already begun to build their own online networks—with Canadian unions as the leaders in this effort.

In 1981, Larry Kuehn and Arnie Myers of the British Columbia Teachers Federation (BCTF), faced with the challenge of organizing across a province over 940,000km², gave each executive member a computer with a modem and printer (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Lee, 2000). Eric Lee (2000) of LabourStart, a labour news aggregating website, argued that this “first labour network” allowed for the “swift and effective responses” that helped BCTF survive attacks from Bill Bennett’s right-wing provincial government. Six years later, Marc Belanger, working at CUPE, created another digital labour network with the 1987 launch of SoliNet—“the Solidarity Network” (Belanger, 1992). SoliNet connected Canadian unions and allied organizations with one another through e-mail and computer conferencing, and was used to circulate news, publish and share various materials, facilitate e-workshops and courses, track grievances, and help coordinate bargaining and strike efforts, among other functions (Belanger, 1992). In 1992, Belanger reported on the early progress of SoliNet at the first

international labour conference on technologies; and in 1996, Eric Lee published *The Labour Movement and the Internet: The New Internationalism*, both a practical guide and principled push for unions to adopt the internet.

However, it wasn't until after the 1999 Battle of Seattle had called attention to the concrete mobilizing possibilities offered by the virtual world that the potentials of the internet for the labour movement fostered any significant academic discussion. Most of these early studies were encouraging and highlighted the potential benefits the internet could offer on such issues as cross-border worker solidarity, improving services, enhancing participation, attracting members, developing virtual unions, representing freelancers, enhancing democracy in unions, and reinvigorating and modernizing union practices (Diamond and Freeman, 2002; Fiorito and Bass, 2002; Fiorito et al., 2002; Greene et al., 2003; Lucio, 2003). However, even as a clear strategy "of modernization, efficient organizing and improved public relations" was being laid out with the affordances of new technologies in mind, unions already appeared to be failing in all of these regards (Ward and Lusoli, 2003).

In "Dinosaurs in Cyberspace?: British Trade Unions and the Internet," Ward and Lusoli (2003) argued that, "parties, governments, pressure groups and TUs [trade unions] have harnessed to varying degrees the characteristics of ICTs [information and communication technologies] to strengthen their position in the political arena. Yet ICTs create as many problems as they resolve, especially for TUs" (p. 175). Drawing on a content analysis of 46 unions' websites, a questionnaire survey of 50 unions, and interviews with officials across 8 unions, Ward and Lusoli found that union sites only had small, specialized audiences, did not offer improvements to services, and scored low on participation indexes. The authors concluded that, "if, as some argue, the main problem of the unions is not the low demand of unionization and activity, but rather the insufficient offer of participatory opportunities, then the opportunity ICTs offer in this respect has not, as yet, been seized" (p. 175).

Many of the problems outlined by Ward and Lusoli (2003) were echoed in other studies, such as Lucio, Trevorrow, and Walker's (2009) "Making networks and (re)making trade union bureaucracy: A European-wide case study of trade union engagement with the Internet and networking." In this study which examined the use of ICTs in sixteen different cross-national trade union projects led by the European Trade

Union Confederation (ETUC), Lucio, Trevorrow, and Walker found there were many “tensions between organisational hierarchies, competing communities of practice, and competing understandings and traditions of the Internet itself” which were preventing unions from making the most out of these new technological affordances. The early literature on unions and their use of the networked technologies overwhelmingly found that the horizontal nature of the internet appeared to be challenging the role of unions, and, perhaps as a result, trade unions did not seem to be taking advantage of the interactivity offered by the internet, instead using it as a one-way form of communication (Aalto-Matturi, 2005; Diamond and Freeman, 2007; Lucio and Walker, 2005; Lucio, Trevorrow, and Walker, 2009; Ward and Lusoli, 2003).

The initial possibilities offered by digital technologies and the internet were both limited and limiting in terms of interactive communicative possibilities. However, the rise of social media opened up significantly greater possibilities for unions, as well as more fertile ground for academic study.

Panagiotis Panagiotopoulos (2012) surveyed members of a Greek banking sector union with the aim of investigating how members “perceive opportunities for online engagement and what the differences are between traditional and online audiences” (p. 178). The union selected in this study represented about 1200 employees in a medium-sized commercial bank and was led by a team of young officials who themselves are quite active online: “Since 2008, the leadership team had recognised the potential of web technologies by developing a website and considering further steps” (Panagiotopoulos, 2012, p. 182). Panagiotopoulos found that a majority of members were both familiar with the major social media platforms (especially Facebook and Twitter) and open to engaging with their union via these platforms. Furthermore, the study’s author found that the more members used a particular social media platform the more benefits they could envision from the union’s engagement with that platform. Panagiotopoulos draws two important conclusions from his findings: on the one hand, he argues that the unions have the potential to exploit their role as facilitators of networking through these channels in order to expand the engagement of its members. “By embarking on networking opportunities,” the author concludes, “younger employees can become gradually introduced to the ideas of unionism, which can significantly increase their possibility to engage in further activities such as industrial actions” (p. 187). On the other hand, Panagiotopoulos also notes that since members have such a familiarity with

social media, they will expect the union's online engagement to adhere to the conventions of the platform:

For example, in social networking groups such as Facebook, traditional models of authoritative leadership have to be adapted so that all members have opportunities to participate and express their opinions. In tools such as blogs, the style and content of information presented cannot resemble the traditional announcements by media offices; instead, posts should aim to foster interactivity and exchange of opinions (p. 188).

In "The Picket Line Online: Creative Labor, Digital Activism, and the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America Strike," Miranda Banks (2010) outlines the impact that WGA's understanding of the conventions of digital media had on the success of their strike. Despite the fact that digital distribution of media was the central tension of the strike, the WGA mobilized the digital sphere "as a tactical strategy for representation, visibility, and promotion" (Banks, 2010, p. 20). The WGA made particular use of humorous streaming videos, poking fun at the internet celebrity of cats while explaining the strike. By supporting a multiplicity of voices the WGA actually unified members, and "proved a challenging adversary to the AMPTP and their traditional, centralized media relations tactics" (Banks, 2010, p. 29).

In Australia, Lisa Milner (2012) examined a selection of union YouTube videos that depict workers and strikes. Milner argues that since less than twenty percent of the Australian workforce is unionized "it seems logical to think that more people base their ideas of unions and unionists on media representations, rather than their own experience" (p. 15). Thus, while these videos certainly added new dimensions to unionized workers' lives and contributed to their sense of online community, they also played a role in providing a counter-narrative to mainstream media's negative depiction of unionists (Milner, 2012). Underlying Milner's study is the implication that social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, have such high profiles that they now form part of the public sphere. This argument suggests that while unions may continue to face attacks in the mainstream media, they no longer need to address these critiques in a forum shaped by the attackers themselves, and instead can now engage directly with the public on social media—essentially the new fifth estate—in a narrative of their own choosing.

Tim Fowler and Doug Hagar (2013) contend that the 2011 Canadian federal election was the first time in which unions in Canada were using social media as part of their election strategy. Fowler and Hagar conducted a content analysis of all of the posts made by a dozen of Canada's largest unions during the two months preceding the May 2 election.⁶ The authors argue that social media were not particularly well used by unions during these elections, attributing this failure to a lack of interactivity in unions' social media usage. Significantly, the failed communication opportunity was partly due to the unions' shortage of followers—whose numbers resemble more those of individuals than those of national organizations—and also to the content of the union posts themselves, which did not lend themselves well to discussion (Fowler and Hagar, 2013). Fowler and Hagar argue that their research confirmed “that many unions see Internet communication, whether in Web 1.0 or Web 2.0, as essentially unidirectional” (p. 222).

Because unions are established organizations, developing NSM [new social media] use policies and strategies takes time to be incorporated into existing communications systems and may require institutional restructuring to respond to more flexible and instantaneous communication procedures that tend not to be consistent with traditional hierarchical bureaucratic procedures (ibid.).

The authors echo the sentiments expressed in earlier studies of how unions use the internet, namely that the internal top-down, hierarchical decision-making structure of unions translated into a similar unidirectional engagement with social media (Aalto-Matturi, 2005; Diamond and Freeman, 2007). Fowler and Hagar conclude that given time, through a focus on increasing followers, a push toward posting more regularly, and the adoption of a more interactive approach, Canadian unions could eventually take greater advantage of the potential of social media.

The Union Network International (UNI) conducts an annual worldwide survey of unions' use of social media. The survey seeks to answer how much unions' uptake of social media is influenced by technological factors such as perceived risks and benefits;

⁶ The Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE), the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW), the Union of Workers in the Hotel, Gaming, Food Service, Manufacturing, Textile, Laundry, and Airport Industries (UNITE HERE), and Workers United.

by organizational factors such as staff, density, age, members, resources, and leadership; or by environmental factors such as the presence of institutional enablers, or the union's participation in communities of practice (Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015). Panagiotis Panagiotopoulos and Julie Barnett analyzed the results of the 2013 survey and found that the strongest contributing factors to unions' use of social media are its alliances with other unions and its leadership: "as the survey suggests, it is mainly leadership that defines the appropriateness of social media and determines the mobilization of necessary resources" (p. 526). From the additional comments that the respondents, who mainly consisted of communications staff, were asked to provide, four key issues came up consistently: (a) that the potential benefits of social media should no longer be ignored as it "has been substantial on reducing geographical fragmentation and accelerating mobilization efforts"; (b) that younger people, both among the staff and members, are far more enthusiastic about using social media, whereas older leaders in particular are more likely to "perceive social media as suitable only for leisure activities"; (c) that the lack of openness in unions' communication structures is one of the main issues that hinders the use of social media, as "leaders are not eager to allow a large number of union employees to produce union information on a regular basis"; and finally, (d) that more research is needed in order "to understand the relevance of social media in union activities and adapt to the use of multiple channels" (p. 524).

Over a period of four months, Hodder and Houghton (2015) conducted a systematic examination of the UK's University and College Union's (UCU) Twitter account in terms of method, scope, and content. The authors argue that the majority of UCU tweets are not framed in language that would support mobilization (p. 185). Furthermore, while some of the tweets seem to be "in line with typologies of communication used by political organisations and wider social movements in terms of information provision, campaigning, [and] building links with other organisations and promoting participation," there are a strikingly low number of tweets that fit the categories of 'recruitment,' 'interaction,' or 'engagement' (Hodder and Houghton, 2015, p. 186). Hodder and Houghton conclude that it was clear that the UCU was not using Twitter to its "full potential" and that, as Panagiotopoulos and Barnett (2015) suggest, "further research is needed to continue this line of investigation" regarding how unions use social media (p. 187).

While many of these studies have argued that the hierarchal structure of many unions might be getting in the way of the horizontal benefits of social media use, Jen Schradie (2015) contends that there has not been enough research to draw such a conclusion. In a study which made use of in-depth interviews, ethnographic data, and online analysis of two North Carolina unions that Schradie characterizes as radical and reformist, respectively, the author argues that unions shaped by a more top-down, reformist organizing ideology may in fact make better use of social media than their bottom-up radical counterparts. Despite social media's touted bottom-up organizing principle, it was the top-down reformist union that Schradie observed which "fetishized digital technology as a pipeline to powerful individuals as well as an efficient means to communicate with and monitor members." Unions win battles through their power vis a vis an employer's power—as well as what the employer perceives that power to be—and while media relations unquestionably contribute to the power a union is able to build, the author suggests, it is no longer the most important way unions can demonstrate that power because they can now demonstrate mobilization through social media engagement. The bottom-up radical union, on the other hand, "rarely used digital technology because many union activists did not believe that it brought people together in a meaningful way" (ibid.).

Schradie's study is, of course, not large enough to draw such broad or definitive conclusions about either the structural or long-term use of social media by top-down vs bottom-up labour organizations, however one chooses to define them. And while social media may prove to be an effective lobbying tool when it is well-resourced and its uses are centrally controlled—this kind of usage overlooks the long-term importance of participatory practices beyond the immediate goals of a particular round of bargaining. Research suggests unions seem to be overlooking this collective identity-building function of social media, or possibly fear that it is not worth the risks that come with corporate-owned, state-monitored platforms (e.g. Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Qiu, 2016). While some radical organizations might prove to be reluctant to use platforms that they think are exploitable by the corporate community and vulnerable to state surveillance, there is little doubt that grassroots movements have demonstrated the benefits of this communitarian function of social media. In one such example, Jack Qiu's (2016) "Social Media on the Picket Line" examines the Chinese working-class use of social media on the picket lines over the past decade, and concludes that,

Despite persisting issues of digital divide, mass media instrumentalization, and Internet censorship, it is an epochal transformation to be reckoned with because this ecological change in the media system is more than connecting the dots of individual lifeworlds, more than the ability to set news headlines, more than the convergence of old and new communication practices. It is, ultimately, about building an infrastructure of resistance from the very local to the very global (p. 631).

In *Worker Resistance and Media: Challenging Global Corporate Power in the 21st Century*, Lina Dencik and Peter Wilkin (2015) argue that this effort of 'building an infrastructure of resistance from the very local to the very global'—or as Dencik and Wilkin call it, a globalization from below—is precisely what is needed to respond to the neoliberal trends of globalization from above. While “the continuing assault upon the labour movement by capital and the state” remain a constant, the media environment—which certainly has been both a place of resistance and repression for the labour movement—has drastically changed, and with this change has come a restructuring of power and resources (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015). While Schradie's (2015) observations on unions' use of social media as a lobbying tool are confirmed in Dencik and Wilkin's analysis, the latter argue that lobbying is not the most effective use of social media and the new terrain it has created, but merely an online extension of existing communication strategies. The trend for unions across the globe, the authors conclude, has been “to focus resources on the professionalization of communication rather than on organizing” (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015, p.96). In other words, “rather than using digital media to mobilise industrial power in new ways, the focus has been on building symbolic power by enhancing pressure through public image campaigns” (ibid.).

Unfortunately, unions do not appear to be taking advantage of this shift in resource power. From over 40 interviews conducted with labour activists, trade union members, members of related social movements, and members of Global Union Federations and academics and journalists, Dencik and Wilkin (2015) found that,

Sceptical towards disruptive change to existing infrastructures and confronted with the sense of unpredictability and lack of control that advancements in technology can introduce, unions have historically been resistant to appropriating technologies that are simultaneously being implemented by corporations to drastically change the working conditions of many of their members (p.83).

The multidimensional relationship between unions and technology that Dencik and Wilkin outline here is one of the central dilemmas faced by unions going forward. There

is a long-term history of messaging and organizational control among unions that grew in part out of the historical dangers of infiltration and manipulation (Adams, 2005). Thus, it appears that taking advantage of a new and more open platform of discourse and activism has provoked an understandable degree of caution on the part of many activists and union brass.

Nonetheless, taken together this research highlights the potential benefits social media could offer the labour movement, such as creating a counter-narrative, community building, mobilizing, and participating in an effort of contributing to the construction of globalization from below. However, this research also seems to point to the necessity that unions reform their operational structures—through the adoption of greater inclusivity, more equity, and greater democracy—before they can effectively utilize the potential advantage that social media can offer. On the other hand, it is also not clear that unions' failures in terms of social media use is entirely, or even mostly, a result of these operational issues. Significant research remains to be done, particularly in Canada, to understand exactly how unions have been using new media and where and how this usage has succeeded or failed. Of course, this is not to say that social media has had a marginal impact on union organizing, as there have been important union successes in which social media has played a significant role, such as the aforementioned OUR Walmart (Organization United for Respect at Walmart) campaign, a union mediated, worker driven effort that used Facebook as a key tool for organizing (Caraway, 2016).

2.4. Literature on Social Movements' Use of Social Media

Given the perceived weaknesses of the use of social media by unions in their various attempts at renewal in the digital age, it is important to look farther afield at the use of social media by groups that share some of the same progressive goals that unions are perceived to promote. If the democratization and broadening of the union movement is an essential path to renewal, then social media, a tool that can be extremely broad in its uses and, as many argue, potentially democratic by its nature, can surely play a role in this process. Of course, corporations, conservative organizations, and the alt-right have used social media to great effect, and though there may be some important lessons for unions in this regard, it is the various organizing successes of social movements in the social media realm that arguably provide the greatest lessons

to unions in terms of goals and potential use. In the wake of the “Arab Spring” and the Occupy movement, there is an abundance of research into what these new resources mean for social efforts and how much social media can be relied on as a tool in current social upheavals and those to come. There are significant implications of a potential cultural shift for which digital technology in general, and social media in particular, may produce the conditions. And given that the new social movements discussed below have generated serious opposition to existing hierarchies—a kind of opposition that unions may have to replicate in order to renew their social and political significance—understanding how these movements have succeeded or failed in this field can represent an important contribution to the potential success or failure of unions in this regard.

There have been a number of competing and even contradictory perspectives regarding the role social media can play in terms of reshaping politics or even reshaping the way in which people see themselves and their relationship to social change. In “The Public Sphere and Network Democracy: Social Movements and Political Change?” Petros Iosifidis and Mark Wheeler (2015) explore the democratic possibilities of social media and provide a broad history of the academic debate concerning social media’s implications for the public sphere, arguing that “the initial optimism associated with a virtual public sphere was replaced by doubts about whether this model was appropriate for the development of democratic values” (p. 2). However, while there is a tendency—as with many significant historical events—to see the introduction of digital media in general, and social media in particular, as either implying a significant break with the past conventions on the one hand (e.g. Bennett, 2012; Castells, 2012; van Dijck and Poell, 2013), or in terms of its continuity with traditional politics on the other (e.g. Carty, 2015; Creech, 2014; Meuleman and Boushel, 2013,), taken together the literature suggests that the use of social media both creates new possibilities for political organizing while operating within existing hegemonic power structures.

Many scholars in this area of analysis maintain that the internet was early on being shaped by the prevailing political conditions in different settings, and that as a result of this the online world might only replicate socioeconomic status quo (e.g. Creech, 2014; Loader and Mercea, 2011; Street, 1996; Tufekci, 2017). Also present in the literature are concerns around social media’s potential to feed into users’ narcissism (e.g. Twenge, 2013), and some have doubts about whether these personal platforms for

self-publishing could truly lead to sustained collective activity (e.g. Creech, 2014; Meulemen and Boushel, 2013). The more skeptical authors argue that social media simply replicates the problems of hierarchies and power relations already inherent in the conventional political realm, problems that have arguably made institutional transformations like union renewal so challenging.

In “Hashtags, Ruling Relations and The Everyday: Institutional Ethnography Insights on Social Movements,” Meuleman and Boushel (2013) question what it really means to be acting politically and warn that in this surge of literature investigating the use of social media by social movements, academics are not yet making clear distinctions between individual voices online and effective political strategy. In their study, which applied Dorothy Smith’s institutional ethnography approach to an analysis of the 2009-10 protests in Iran and the 2011 uprisings in Egypt, Meuleman and Boushel conclude that “social media can be acknowledged within the activities of social movement activists, without necessarily insisting that these technologies are the drivers of action” (p.60). They argue that “the technology that enables the production of texts by historically situated people and the texts themselves are part of the enabling and sustaining of this network of everyday experiences we call social movements” (ibid.). This view, which emphasizes continuity of political action, suggests that the medium’s influence is extremely limited and that it has little, if any, power to transform the specific undertakings of political activism themselves, particularly given that, according to the authors, acts of political opposition on social media are limited, at some profound level, to textual expression (ibid.).

Other academics, such as Brian Creech (2014), also have little hope for social media’s ability to change how people engage in politics and see this new technology as a tool at best, or an addendum at worst, for pre-existing political identities. As Creech argues in “Digital Representation and Occupy Wall Street’s challenge to Political Subjectivity,” “to say that the physical crush of people in Zuccotti Park presaged critical awareness of the movement, or that social media tools enabled a swell of material support, ignores the complex interplay between representation as an ontological and a political category that granted the movement its critical power and thus the ability to render protesters’ various concerns relevant” (p. 473).

Victoria Carty's (2015) *Social Movements and New Technology* examines some of the most important social movements of the past decade—including the “Arab Spring” and Occupy Wall Street—through the lens of social movement theories, such as resource mobilization and political process theories, as well as media studies analyses that consider the impact of technology on collective behaviour. Over all, Carty admits little power for social media to reshape the political subject itself, stressing the continuity of political processes and thought which see the political environment in which social movements emerge as the important factor in their development, while adding social media as a tool of conventional politics: “wired activism does not replace, but rather adds to, traditional forms of protest activity” (p. 181).

However, Carty also allows for the emergence of discontinuity by arguing that the ‘political openings’ that traditional process theory focuses on as necessary for such movements to form can now be found online rather than strictly in formal institutions. By providing new avenues of communication through which people can express their grievances, the author suggests, social media allow citizens with common causes to discover and connect with one another. Consequently, where the relationship between online activism and local organizing continues to grow symbiotically, as Carty explains, “collective identity can be established, at least originally, through weak ties in cyberspace and can lead to activity in the real world to forge stronger sense of collective identity in tangible community settings” (p. 151-52). This relationship demonstrates both the connection between information sharing and community activism, and the outcomes social media facilitate:

In many cases, the *perception* of opportunities, the *framing* of issues, the formation of key *alliances* both locally and internally, as well as the creation of innovative tactics as part of a strategic repertoire of contention, can sometimes trump pre-existing structures (Carty, 2015, p. 123, original emphasis).

Carty contends that such a study demonstrates “the *unquestionable* role that new digital technology has on mobilizing efforts,” and suggests social media could have the ability “to expand conceptualizations of Habermas’s conception of the ‘public sphere’ and participatory democracy” and usher in a genuinely new model of politics (p. 180; p. 78).

In “Fair Copyright for Canada: Lessons for Online Social Movements from the First Canadian Facebook Uprising,” Blaine Haggart (2013) also draws on resource

mobilization and political process theories to evaluate the political effectiveness of social media for recent social movements. Using the case study of the 2007 Canadian “user rights” copyright movement, which was largely spearheaded by the Facebook page Fair Copyright for Canada and managed to effect actual policy change by forcing the Conservative government to back away from a policy that would have strongly backed the rights of copyright holders, Haggart outlines how “social media have changed the type and quantity of resources needed to create and sustain social movements, creating openings for new groups and interests” (p. 843). Social media, Haggart argues, by affecting the relative importance of specific resources to the success of a movement, has reconfigured communicative power relations.

This reconfiguring seems in many cases to shift communicative power away from the centrality of a political leader or party and increases the political weight of individual actors, a process which Manuel Castells (2007; 2012) refers to as the personalization of politics. Castells contends that the more personalized form of politics that social media have allowed for has proven to be vital in the development of grassroots networks because of the way in which they enhance personal autonomy. This notion moves the narrative away from the position that new media is a kind of technological addendum to conventional political processes and institutions. Instead, Castells sees this new mode of personalized politics being formed through social media as having potentially revolutionary implications concerning how people see themselves as political actors and thus how they actively pursue causes important to them. This idea is supported by scholars such as W. Lance Bennett (2012), who argues in “The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation,” that “the rise of personalized form of political participation is perhaps the defining change in the political culture of our era” (p. 37). This line of reasoning highlights the fact that not only have new social movements in fact formed online, but that they have affected the development of what Castells (2001) calls the network society, including “a new social structure (a network society), a new economy (a global informational economy), and a new culture (a culture of ‘real virtuality’).”

José van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2013) echo this assertion that social media has changed the balance of communicative power to posit an even more sweeping view of the potentially transformational effects of social media. In “Understanding Social Media Logic,” van Dijck and Poell map out the norms, strategies, mechanisms, and

economies that underpin what they refer to as a “social media logic,” and examine them against the previously established “mass media logic.” Just as mass media is regarded as having reshaped the social order of the 1960s and 1970s, social media is seen by these authors as transforming the social order of the new millennium. Finding that social media logic can be characterized by four key elements—programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication—the authors suggest that these elements “should help [us] to understand the nature of communication and information processes in the networked conditions of social life” and argue that these transformations imply a shift of communicative power (p. 11).

While much of this literature helps to understand the ways in which social media may have created political openings for these movements to take shape, these studies do not exactly offer assembly instructions that unions can follow for implementing social media as an effective organizing tool. Margetts et al. (2016) argue that this is because these movements form out of a “chaotic pluralism,” and that we need to understand these new political movements are more like chaotic natural systems such as the weather. In *Political Turbulence: How Social Media Shape Collective Action*, Margetts et al. use a combination of big data and personality profiles to analyze the use of social media by social movements. Echoing findings in the research outlined above, the authors argue that social media offer people easier access to engage politically. Through “tiny acts” such as a like, share, or tweet, people are able to “make micro-donations of time and effort to political causes throughout their daily activities” (Margetts et al., 2016, p. 122). This increased accessibility has created a surge of engagement which can sometimes result in the swell of social movements seen over the past decade. However, because of their chaotic nature, most of these mobilization efforts fail. Margetts et al. argue that despite this likelihood of failure, the most important takeaway of the study is that by allowing people to contribute to a cause through these “tiny acts” of participation, social media draw those into participating whose personalities are not traditionally associated with political engagement.

In *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, Zeynep Tufekci (2017) also draws attention to the fact that many of these protests fall apart quickly. Like Margetts et al., Tufekci moves away from either championing these protests as grand successes or dismissing these protests as failures *in toto*, and instead calls on

us to see the ways in which these technologically-mediated protests are ends in themselves.

Tufekci (2017) argues that the internet offers a rapid growth of movements without the organizational structure to sustain them. Because digital tools enable great logistical endeavours to be accomplished with a few tweets (such as assembling thousands of people in a physical space in a short amount of time), the author observes, movements such as Occupy or the “Arab Spring” were not able to rely on the structural strength built through the often-tedious grunt work that went into organizing large demonstrations of the past. While the horizontalism of social media was actively upheld in places such as Tahrir Square or Zuccotti Park, in practice collective decision making was slow and prevented the protesters from adapting tactics to the changing political response without complete consensus, leading to what Tufekci calls a tactical freeze. Despite these challenges, she argues, leaderlessness can be an end in itself, since “the expressive side of protests is part of the reward that protesters seek” (p. 89).

The consistently swift execution of logistically onerous endeavours in Tahrir Square, Gezi Park, Zuccotti Park, etc., demonstrated the way social media tools could facilitate this cooperative expression. Besides the obvious unified drive to protest in the first place, these demonstrations very quickly became small villages where human needs and values were exchanged outside of commodity relations. From well-stocked libraries, to medical tents, to food and shelter, to cleaning crews, these protests had an abundance of resources and volunteers all coordinated without structural leadership and with the use of social media. “The sense of rebellion that is felt at a protest and the work that people perform in protests are inseparable” (ibid., p.88). In other words, while the media and government may have been complaining that demands weren't clear—protesters were actively demonstrating their demands: an equitable community of care and belonging not mediated by financial transactions or controlled by hierarchies of power.

Tufekci (2017) argues that it is not as some may claim, evidence that social media are breeding a different kind of human, but rather that social media have created a “different architecture of connectivity,” and “preexisting human dynamics” are now occurring in online spaces (p. 131, p. 169). “Meaning making and ritual creation” also occur online, and social media allow protesters to create and express a culture and

value that extend far beyond the reaches of the site of protest (p.112). She concludes that, “if there is any broad claim to be made about digital technologies and social movements, it is that these tools often greatly enhance narrative capacity” (p. 274).

Taken all together this literature suggests that social media platforms are shifting the political capacities of social movements, and while they may amplify the tension between empowering individual voices and expressing the will of the group (a tension very familiar to unions), it is often the participatory nature of social media platforms that draw people to join them in the first place. If the union movement is able to harness even a portion of the narrative capacity or performative consciousness-raising function of social media, renewal would be a significantly greater possibility. There are undoubtedly growing concerns about issues such as inequality and hierarchies both within institutions like unions and without. If those emphasizing that social media has opened a cultural shift in political engagement are correct, then an effective adoption of these new technologies by unions could have a significant impact on how they operate. And while the uses of social media demonstrated in the “Arab Spring” or Occupy movements may point us in the direction of logistical “effective use,” it is important not to assume that these organizing successes are directly translatable to other fields of activism such as the labour movement, or even that these protests stand as successful models, particularly considering the current state of affairs in both the MENA region and the United States.

2.5. Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to, first, reach an understanding of the broader academic conversation concerning Canadian union renewal in order to better situate a project on Canadian unions’ use of social media within this context; second, review the literature concerning unions’ engagement with the internet’s networking and communication capabilities; and finally, explore some of the research on the use of social media in social movements, against which Canadian unions’ use of social media can be compared. We have seen in the union renewal literature that academics believe that in order to renew themselves, Canadian unions need to democratize their internal structures to achieve equity and better represent Canada’s diverse workforce, expand their education and outreach efforts to include the precariat, and move towards new models of organizing that build alliances with international social movements and local

community organizations. It is also clear that while social media would seem to be an ideal tool in serving these efforts, unions do not seem to be taking full advantage of this potential, and academics have been slow to explore the question of why that might be the case—or even how social media is being used by unions when it is. In looking to social movements' use of social media we have seen the potential for social media to create new openings for political engagement by making it accessible through smaller contributions, a wider exchange of information, and a new personalized form of politics. But, more than this, some see social media as an instigator of a new kind of awareness of political engagement itself, one that could potentially change how people see society and their place in it. Many academics consider this a cultural shift in political engagement, one which unions could take advantage of, but which union renewal literature seems to fail to recognize or engage.

Such a cultural shift has precedent in relation to the union movement. The initial twentieth century wave of radicalism and unionization in North America took place in the midst of a significant cultural transformation. As Michael Denning (1996) points out in *The Cultural Front*, the “labouring of America” occurred when groups of activists, intellectuals, and artists coalesced and formed an “extraordinary flowering of the arts, entertainment, and thought based on the broad social movement that came to be known as the Popular Front” (xvi). In other words, the first wave of genuinely modern and widespread unionization in North America (and elsewhere for that matter), occurred during the early emergence of mass media and was part of an important cultural change in how people viewed labour, the economy, hierarchies, the arts, and critical thought. Significantly, the growing workforce within the rising cultural industries put their occupational competencies to work in developing labour-centric cultural forms. There is, therefore, good reason to believe that a second wave of unionization, if indeed it is to occur, must be accompanied by the formation of a similar cultural front, drawing on the forms of networked communication which are increasingly crucial to the economy at large. Social media could be an important tool in that cultural shift, but only if the communicative tool does more than simply reflect outmoded and traditional hierarchies of the labour movement. Social media has fostered rapid growth of movements, but they lack the organizational structure to sustain them; unions have the organization structure, but they reflect precisely the types of hierarchical structure that protesters were demonstrating against—the structure that union renewal scholars have suggested is

encumbering their evolution. Is there a meeting point where unions can bring their organizational skills to new protest movements to sustain them while letting the horizontalism of the internet shape the union? Though a clear answer to this question will only unfold during the coming years, to begin to flesh out this problem requires that we examine more closely how unions, their communicative professionals, and their members are presently using social media and what problems and tensions may be emerging in that practice. The study outlined in the following chapter investigates a portion of this practice within the Canadian context.

Chapter 3.

Primary Research Findings: Canadian Unions' Use of Social Media

3.1. Introduction

The Canadian union renewal literature suggests that in order to increase their strength and influence, unions need to consider structural changes concerning equity, organizing, and representation (Camfield, 2011; Foley and Baker, 2010; Ross et al, 2015). Furthermore, there is a recognized need for unions to develop a stronger narrative capacity in spaces of public discourse in order to inspire, to educate, and to demonstrate how union issues are central to social justice (ibid.). Taken together, such shifts in focus could develop a more powerful communitarian spirit among unions and the broader population which, in the long run, is essential to achieving widespread union renewal (Keenen, 2015; Tufts, 2009).

While, as the previous chapter underscored, social media have remained noticeably absent from the academic consideration of Canadian union renewal, beyond the Canadian context a handful of researchers have explored the question of social media's potential for union organizing. These scholars agree that social media can play a significant role in this union renewal process, however, their research also suggests that social media have been under-utilised, that unions have failed to tailor their approach to the respective demands of each social media platform, that they are not getting enough followers, that they are weak in their use of mobilizing language, and that they are not providing a powerful enough counter-narrative to overcome the existing negative views of unions (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Hodder and Houghton, 2015; Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015; Sipp, 2016).

By changing the 'architecture of connectivity' (Tufekci, 2017) between people across the globe, social media have shifted the nature and use of resources and capacities, opening up new horizons of political activism (e.g. Carty, 2015; Margetts et al., 2016; Tufekci, 2017). In the study of social movements, we have seen radical expansions of political organizing online. And though this early enthusiasm for new

political outlets is still being met with scepticism among scholars, there have been clear and important organizing successes for new social movements using digital technologies (e.g. Haggart, 2013). The literature suggests that online organizing, rather than wholly replacing person to person political networking, serves as an increasingly essential tool in driving and facilitating that effort (e.g. Carty, 2015; Margetts et al., 2016).

What remains unclear, however, is how or why social movements have successfully capitalised on the organizing potential of social media in ways that unions have been unable to. While unions have undoubtedly made use of social media, their relative lack of success in this regard, and the relative success of social movements, have led some researchers to ask if unions have simply shifted their established organizing principles to a new outlet without the accompanying paradigm shift that is necessary for a digital union renewal (e.g. Dencik and Wilkin, 2015). On the one hand, many of the labour movement's renewal goals seem to line up with the open potential of social media. On the other hand, existing research on unions' use of social media suggests the goals and practice in this regard are somewhat disconnected. This is one of the central dilemmas of any continuing research on unions' outreach efforts moving forward.

To explore these questions, this study investigates the use of social media by some of Canada's most prominent labour organizations—the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), United Food and Commercial Workers Canada (UFCW), Unifor Canada, and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)—through interviews with key staff and a look at these organizations' Facebook and Twitter output. The study finds that while these unions have been increasing their social media engagement and demonstrating an increased focus on communications generally, they have not necessarily been able or willing to adopt what the staff outlined as best practices regarding social media communications to build their capacities and operationalize their goals and principles. This chapter outlines some of the tensions at the root of this inconsistency that were uncovered by this study.

First, there is a struggle within the unions to determine and establish the role social media should play within the broader scope of union communications. There is a tendency for social media to operate as a distinct, and secondary, realm of communication which must “fight” for precious communications resources, which

exposes inconsistencies not just about how communications should be practiced, but also about what role the union plays in the community. The open, participatory elements of social media were perceived by the staff as part of the organic growth of union related communication, but for leadership this tended to cause concern that social media would allow for control of labour communications to fall out of the hands of the union designated professionals. Beyond this tension lies the challenging question of how unions are to measure successful, or effective, use of social media. When speaking broadly about how social media fits into communication strategy, interviewees discussed principles of community, engagement, access, and organizing. However, when it came to addressing strategies and best practices, these topics dropped off and the emphasis turned to quantitative indicators, citing the difficulty of measuring quality engagement versus the ease of measuring numerically online.

On the whole this study finds that on the one hand, while the connectivity that social media offers would seem to line up perfectly with the communication and organizing needs of unions, labour organizations' centralized and protective structures hinder their ability to take advantage of its benefits. On the other hand, while social media has unquestionably become an essential arena for public discourse, the medium's connectivity is also manipulated by algorithms created in the interest of private profit and corporations. Thus, while the findings of this research suggest that unions should open up their digital communications to their own staff, members, and the wider community, studies continue to emerge which put into question the viability of using social media as platforms for open public discourse (e.g. Channel 4 News, 2018).

3.2. Approach

The review of the literature on Canadian union renewal and new social movements' use of social media pointed to consistency between the fundamental principles that unions claim to represent, the renewal goals put forward in the literature, and the potentials of social media. Yet the research that exists of unions' use of social media points to inconsistency between these goals and many aspects of union social media practice. This research seeks to explore whether this inconsistency exists in the Canadian setting and, if so, investigate the nature of this inconsistency by asking how Canadian unions are using social media?

As we have seen, little research has been undertaken to examine the details of social media usage by Canadian unions. However, as a nation with high rates of internet access and a medium degree of union membership—union engagement in Canada is approximately 30%, as opposed to a low of 10% in the US, and a high of more than 50% in Scandinavian countries (OECD, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2017)—where there are a number of large unions in a good position to take advantage of those factors, Canada is an excellent candidate for this kind of research. There are 776 unions in Canada. While the majority of these are directly chartered (290) or independent local (250) unions, nearly 70% of unionized workers in Canada are represented by national unions (ESDC, 2016). This study focused on the social media strategies of the national offices of CUPE, Unifor, and UFCW, which were chosen on the basis of their scope and the variety of workers that they collectively represent. These are three of Canada’s largest unions, which together make up about twenty-five percent of Canada’s 4,830,000 unionized workers, and six percent of Canada’s total workforce (ibid.). They cover a broad range of sectors, with CUPE representing the largest share of public sector employees including health care, education, social services, and transportation workers; Unifor representing the largest share of private sector employees in fields such as communications, energy, and automotive; and UFCW representing workers in food and other commercial sectors. This study also looks at the social media strategy of the CLC. The CLC is an umbrella organization that represents more than 60% of unionized workers in Canada (ibid.),⁷ and provides guidance and resources to Canadian unions and expresses their collective principles and goals. In addition to representatives from these organizations, the editor at the Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM) was also consulted. CALM is a cooperative that provides communications support to nearly 200 labour unions across Canada.

For CUPE, Unifor, and UFCW, it is at the national level that decisions are made about the union’s strategic communicative directions and how those directions will be operationalized in order to pursue the union’s outreach efforts. Furthermore, together the communications offices of the CLC and the nation’s largest unions have the most visible profile in representing Canadian unions and play an integral role in the public perception of unions, and thus will necessarily be an important part of any union renewal process.

⁷ The CLC coverage is down from the ESDC’s (2016) 70% to approximately 63% with the 2018 disaffiliation of Unifor.

A total of five interviews were conducted with the communications officers, directors, or executives whose responsibilities related to the union's social media communications. These were Derek Johnstone, UFCW executive team member who oversees the UFCW's national communications effort in Canada; Marnie Thorp, social media communications officer at CUPE; Denise Hammond, director of communications at Unifor National; Jarrah Hodge, who was national representative for social media and media relations at the CLC from September 2015-August 2017; and Nora Loreto, editor at CALM. These audio-recorded semi-structured interviews, which ranged from an hour to an hour and a half in length, were conducted between February and May of 2017.

The two sites of analysis of these unions' social media practices were Facebook and Twitter as these are the two primary platforms with which all four organizations are currently engaged. A social media analytics program was used to collect and measure 446 tweets and 271 posts from CUPE, Unifor, UFCW, and the CLC's Twitter and Facebook accounts over the span of two months, from July 24, 2017 to September 23, 2017. Though two months may seem like a short period in the life of a large institution, it is a rather long span of time on a social media platform. Facebook and Twitter feeds change quickly, and audiences often base their continuing engagement in the social media process based upon small numbers of interactions (O'Neil, 2016). The content of two months will offer a meaningful snapshot of the overall output of these unions. Furthermore, because the standard for maintaining engagement with an audience through the use of Twitter and Facebook is to post multiple times a day, the sample size is large.

Ideally, the trajectory through which the union communication process occurs begins at institutional goals or principles. While there are always specific operational demands put upon a trade union at any given time with which their communications efforts must cope, their fundamental goals or *raison d'être* (often expressed in their founding or constitutional document) of, for example, social justice and economic equality should be a moving force behind their communications efforts. Such efforts are then expressed in the specific goals of their communications departments. The communication departments then develop strategies for pursuing these goals, and these strategies are then expressed in various practices, which include the union's social media engagement. This study asks how these Canadian unions are using social media to participate in public discourse, and this effort relies on mapping out union principles,

goals, strategies, and practice, and the relationship between these elements.⁸ Principles can be taken from union constitutions and broader understanding of what unions do. The interviews serve to understand how these principles factor into and translate to the goals of the communication departments, and how those departments attempt to operationalize their goals. The analysis of these unions' social media accounts serves to look at the actual practice of Canadian unions' online engagement. The hope is that by comparing the strategies expressed in the interviews, and the practices evident in the unions' social media engagement, with the principles and goals of the unions as a whole, the question of whether and where any discord exists in the continuum of union communication would become clear.

3.3. Overview of Findings

3.3.1. The Guiding Principles: Union Constitutions

Challenging and/or counteracting the exploitative practices of capitalist enterprises was the central motivating factor in the creation and rise of unions. Through organizing collectively, individual labourers can levy the strength and capacity of the workers as a whole to bargain with the employer on a range of issues, including working conditions, wages, and job security. The CLC (2014) constitution affirms: "We believe that every worker is entitled, without discrimination, to a job with decent wages and working conditions, union representation, free collective bargaining, a safe and healthy workplace, and the right to strike." We can say that the most basic goals of unions are therefore to organize workers and advance their social and economic welfare. Of course, one of the primary implications of this basic goal is not simply an effort to protect individual workers who are represented by a specific union, but to strengthen the social and economic position of all workers, and by extension uplift society as a whole: "to advance and safeguard the full employment, economic security, and social welfare of its members *and of workers generally*" (UFCW, 2013, emphasis added).

⁸ The social media communication process of unions of course extends beyond the scope outlined here, and a more comprehensive study would ideally include the contributions and perspective of union members and workers more generally. This study focuses on these national offices' output on social media and the processes involved in generating that output, and while the interview discussions addresses the contributions of members below, the scope of this study does not include a first-hand worker perspective.

However, the goals of economic security and social welfare are, in an important sense, proximal motivations of the labour movement. Historically, many labour activists have considered that the pursuit of social welfare for ‘workers generally’ implies distal motivations of social and economic equality, peace, and justice. Because the imbalances of capitalism extend well beyond workers’ relationships with employers, the principles set out in these Canadian union constitutions extend beyond this relationship toward broader goals, such as that of promoting “peace and freedom in the world” (CUPE, 2015). The implication here is that social justice for workers requires social justice for everyone.

We believe that we, as members of society, are entitled to basic human rights, political freedom, quality public services, good democratic government, a safe and sustainable environment, a just and equitable society, and a peaceful world (CLC, 2014).

The objective of this union is [...] to protect and extend democratic institutions, civil rights and liberties, and the traditions of social and economic justice of the United States and Canada (UFCW, 2013).

Along with these widespread social aims, Canadian unions have made it clear that everyone must be included in these principles of justice. The constitutions state explicitly that “every worker is an equal member of the human family, regardless of gender, gender identity, colour, creed, ethnic origin, disability, sexual orientation or age” (CLC, 2014) and that it is the responsibility of the unions “to promote equal treatment of everyone regardless of class, race, colour, nationality, age, sex/gender, language, sexual orientation, place of origin, ancestry, religious belief, mental or physical disability and to actively oppose discrimination on any of these grounds” (CUPE, 2015).

It is with these broad principles in mind that many large unions seek not only to organize workers, but also look to harness the power of their own membership and connect it with the rest of the community to “develop lasting bonds of friendship and solidarity” (Unifor, 2016). These constitutional principles demonstrate that, beyond offering representation to their own membership, these unions have wider social justice goals, goals that bring into question some of the basic assumptions of our socioeconomic system and seek a more pervasive social unity. The fact that a union like Unifor (2016) can declare that “unity is the process of transforming individual aspirations into collective interests and action,” demonstrates that a major part of the labour

movement possesses underlying goals of perceived social justice from which they draw fundamental principles which guide their actions at every level.

These efforts at community building, to extend the strength of the union beyond the workplace it covers, require different approaches. CUPE's (2015) constitution speaks to the importance of including the public in this dialogue by "educating the public about the challenges facing public employees," for example, while Unifor's constitution elaborates on the means through which to keep membership engaged and mobilized in the community:

An engaged membership is critical to Unifor's success. Engagement happens when ideas are welcome, involvement is encouraged and when the union actively develops the skills and understanding of its members. In our efforts to be inclusive, we open the union to new members and a broader definition of membership (Unifor, 2016).

Taken together, these constitutions express an understanding that the concerns of workers are interwoven with the concerns of society as a whole, situating the representation of their membership within a wider context of social justice. And as entities that function on a principle of strength in numbers, community building and engagement are central to expanding and levying that strength.

These documents are intended to determine the union's objectives and how the union operates—as Derek Johnstone, who oversees the UFCW's national communications effort in Canada, underlines:

We have a Mission Statement that keeps it fresh on one page. And then on top of that we have our preamble in our constitution, which is our mandate. And those really would be our two guiding documents.

Union constitutions are considered, revised, and recommitted to at every national convention in a democratic process. Of course, like many democratic processes, this does not mean that there is consensus from the rank and file concerning the language in the constitution. Furthermore, while these documents may serve as guiding principles, the way in which they are interpreted by leadership and operationalized, or even the degree to which they are considered in the day to day operations of the union, is not legislatively outlined and therefore can vary widely. Nonetheless, there is a degree of consistency in terms of broad social justice principles and goals across these union

constitutions, and between these constitutions and the goals highlighted in the renewal literature.

3.3.2. Operationalizing Union Goals: Interviews with Communications Staff

The communications staff interviewed for this study all admit that Canadian unions had failed to capitalize early on social media, but that they had begun to use certain platforms as their ubiquity and importance became clear over the past decade. While there may have been some initial doubts concerning the benefits of investing resources in social media, it gradually became clear that unions had no choice about the need to have an online presence. As Jarrah Hodge, former national representative for social media and media relations at the CLC, observes, “more and more people are just accepting that we have to be there, that’s where our members are, that’s where the people we’re trying to organize are, we can’t not be on social media.” The necessity for unions to utilize social media is not only a result of the ubiquitous use of these platforms, but also of the fact that the internet itself is increasingly understood to be not a separate realm from ‘real life’ but a layer of real life itself, and one through which real life decisions are informed and acted upon. Derek Johnstone highlights that, “the vast majority of people who are looking to join the union, find out more about the union and initiate contact with the union online.” And while union websites may provide key static information, social media provides a place for would-be members to engage with the union in a more interactive way.

Concurrent with this recent and increased adoption of social media as a communication tool has been an increased focus on communications as an organizing tool. Over the same decade that has seen the explosion in the broad use of social media, union communication departments have gone from, as Johnstone describes it, one or two people who produce the newsletter, to “being an integral part of everything the organization does [...] a part of the executive team.” Johnstone continues, “it’s become apparent to, I think, most activist organizations who get it, that having a robust communications program and strategy is really key to accomplishing your goals,” especially, he notes, the goal of organizing. Social media platforms offer new points of contact between unions, their membership, and the general public: “[social media] is an efficient and can be a very effective way of reaching particularly unengaged members and the general public that you want to feel more positive about unions” (Hodge). And

the ability to reach people is obviously essential to an organization whose primary capacity is the mobilization of those people: “in order to build your power or to build your capacity you have to go to where your members are [...] and one of those places is social media” (Hodge). Denise Hammond, director of communications at Unifor National (Canada), says this capacity shift is precisely why the rise of social media, particularly with its ever-increasing user base, has changed communication strategy: “we’ve really been able to see quite clearly the capacity that we can have with influencing politicians and decision makers, employers, to apply some political pressure or create situations exposing issues that we’re concerned about.”

On top of this capacity of connecting with people and demonstrating a strength in numbers, is the narrative capacity that mobilizes these numbers of people in the first place, the narrative that connects them to one another and to the union. As news media has become increasingly entwined with the corporate practices from which unions have tried to protect workers and the community, there has been a great deal of reluctance on the part of that media to open up space for a pro-labour narrative (Johnstone; Loreto).

This thing called a labour reporter doesn't exist anymore. Let's face it, you know, the mainstream media, despite what Donald Trump says, are not our best friend. They are businesses, they are corporations, they do have their own agendas and increasingly the narrative of labour doesn't fit (Johnstone).

As what Johnstone declares as “probably the most potent tool in terms of trying to combat neoliberalism,” social media is key for unions to express a counter-narrative, challenge the deterministic/inevitability of inequality and economic insecurity, and help communities to realize their common struggles, interdependence, and communal capacity to oppose. “If we have any chance of having our story told, social media is increasingly becoming a platform that we can use to get our message out” (ibid.).

In terms of how to operationalize this function of social media, there is a common set of best practices expressed by the communications staff across the different organizations. These strategies involve a focus on maximizing engagement and visibility, which means paying attention to the fast-paced timeline of these platforms, posting content relevant to what is happening in the moment (that day, that hour), participating in the real-time conversations, and posting “content that is going to be searched for” (Johnstone). Pursuant to such an effort is the attempt to catch people’s attention with

various effects such as the use of visual content, humour, or intentionally provocative material. Marnie Thorp, social media officer at CUPE, emphasises the need to “always make sure there’s a good graphic.” Hammond similarly observes, “we find better responses when there are visuals that are included.” “A lot of stuff we do we try to be as humorous as we can, realizing that they’re very serious subjects. [...] I think humour goes a long way and it’s social” Johnstone observes, adding to the list of best practices, and this sentiment is echoed by others: “if I can be funny I will be funny” (Thorp). Besides attempts to be humorous or visually striking, the effort to be provocative or incite outrage is another technique that communications officers cite in the effort to increase their union’s social media profile. The staff point out that provocative material can enhance social media engagement, as one communications staff puts it, “some issues lend themselves really well to outrage. I know sometimes when I put something out that it’s going to get people riled up, and they’ll be page after page of comments of people talking about it.”

Communications officers also advocate an open or glib discursive attitude as a strategy for effective social media use; “I try and be chatty” (Thorp). Hodge elaborates on the nuance of that tone of chattiness, explaining that best practice on social media is,

to be authentic and conversational. And we look at a lot of examples from politics usually about politicians who do that well or not so well, people that you can tell they aren't tweeting for themselves, people whose platforms appeal to you because it has a personal tone. So we talk about making it personal and how to talk as yourself without talking about yourself. How to engage people in conversation.

While the platforms’ algorithms are not directly acknowledged as factors in these strategies, they have a peripheral presence in the interviews. Many of the strategies that the staff mention are strategies that respond to Facebook and Twitter’s algorithms which determine the type of content that will get the most visibility and engagement, “some of it is just pure shareability” (Johnstone). Through the use of hashtags, Twitter gives preference to content that is part of current/trending conversation over new and separate topic introduction. Similarly, Facebook gives preference to visual content, and high comment numbers will prop up a post, a process that intentionally or inadvertently promotes provocative and outrageous content. Such processes are driven by the financializing structure of social media platforms, increasingly causing them to be impelled by simple quantity of ‘hits’ a post can generate. This idea of quantitative

measurement as the standard of success in social media is a problem to which all interviewees refer.

Despite the complex issues surrounding the quantitative, provocative, click-bait driven aspects of social media, the most common challenge the interviewees expressed when it came to social media strategy were resource and financial limitations. With an average of three to four people on a communications team, and within that perhaps one person designated to social media, or none at all with everyone sharing the responsibility, “almost universally communications staff feel massively overworked all the time” (Hodge). As a consequence of this dearth of resources, communications departments are unable to accomplish all they set out to, “I usually don't have the time to do more than read the comments,” Hodge laments, “I don't have time to really engage with people. Sometimes I prepare responses to things I think we're going to get, but I don't always have time to do that.”

But while limited resources are holding them back from keeping up with the demands of social media, this hasn't stopped communications officers from thinking about and trying to keep up with social media's perceived future. For example, a number of interviewees mention the new emphasis on livestreaming and what it might do for unions. “Live streaming actually provides a window into various worlds in the labour movement,” Nora Loreto, editor at CALM, observes. Livestreaming apps such as Periscope can be influential “in connecting members directly with a bargaining process that sometimes they feel removed from because they're not at the table” (Hammond). From bargaining sessions, to conferences, to picket lines, livestreaming takes keeping up with the speed of social media to its logical conclusion, engaging people in real time—offering them unprecedented access, involvement, and transparency. Livestreaming is “about breaking down some of those barriers” (Hammond). With the idea of taking the technology one step further, the team at CALM are exploring what function virtual reality might serve in the coming years (Loreto).

Livestreaming is a key function that Instagram added to their platform near the end of 2016. Owned by Facebook, Instagram has one of the fastest growing user bases at the moment, with over 800 million active monthly users as of January 2018, at least 9 million of whom are Canadian (Statista, 2018b, c). Instagram outpaced Twitter in active monthly users back in 2015 worldwide, and while Twitter has been more popular in

Canada than in the U.S., for example, between 2016 and 2017 the percentage of Canadians actively using Twitter dipped from 37% to 31%, while the percentage of Canadians using Instagram increased from 34% to 37% in that same period (ibid.). Despite this trend, these organizations have not focused a great deal of their effort on the platform, and the staff did not express a strong desire to make more use of it in the future. And while the livestreaming function has been central to Instagram's recent growth, Denise Hammond at Unifor, for example, who expressed an interest in expanding the union's use of livestreaming apps, admits "we use it a bit irregularly to be honest." Hammond explains, "Instagram is definitely not a priority because it's not where our membership is." This comment suggests that even within the field of social media, complex decisions have to be made about which particular platforms might correspond to the interests of a particular unions' membership, and this is something that could shift quickly over time.

Despite its growing ubiquity and importance, the communications staff are not unquestioningly enthusiastic about social media, observing that it is "not a silver bullet" that will solve all of the problems facing unions (Johnstone). While the interviewees present a particularly optimistic view of the potentials of social media when they describe their attempts to persuade the union leadership of the value of social media engagement, they also express a more sceptical or pessimistic view in response to a perceived overemphasis or an excessive trust in social media in public discourse.

It doesn't replace face to face organizing, or conversations. It reinforces those conversations and can help sort of demonstrate that we as unions care about the same issues you do. Or our members have the same experience you do (Hodge).

These opposing views or conflicting attitudes towards the possibilities presented by social media engagement are the first clear sign of tension in this communication process. The perception of social media as a distinct, and secondary, realm of communication which must "fight" for precious communications resources, exposes a number of conflicts not just about how communications should be practiced, but also about what role the union plays in the community. This problem seemed to be in evidence in the difference between how the interviewees speak about the function of social media communications in more general terms versus when they talk about applied practice. When speaking broadly about how social media fits into the union's

communication strategy, the staff reflect on principles of community, engagement, access, and organizing. However, when it comes to addressing particular strategies and best practices, these topics drop off and the emphasis turns to quantity, citing the difficulty of measuring quality engagement versus the ease of measuring numerically online.

3.3.3. The Practice: Social Media Output

It would be reasonable to assume that the principles laid out in the various constitutions and mission statements of unions and their umbrella groups would be expressed, whether directly or indirectly, in both the form and content of some, if not most, union communications. But while many union communications are geared toward, or reactions to, specific contractual disputes (and are therefore practical and operational), social media platforms, as the literature suggests, lend themselves to more general socio-political issues (e.g. Carty, 2015). Thus, if one is looking towards communications to express or relate to the underlying principles of unions and their wider social goals, social media platforms appear to be ideal candidates for such principled expressions.

The communications staff interviewed in this study underline that the practice of community building and human empowerment should be an organic extension of the principles of justice, equality, and democracy which are widely expressed and supported by unions in Canada. These aims of participating in the community dialogue, fostering engagement in union issues, and doing so by expressing the universalism of union concerns, which are expressed in the union constitutions and echoed by the staff, are areas for which, as the literature suggests, social media is inherently suited. The interviewees outlined some best practices for success concerning these issues, with the aim of maximizing engagement and visibility through strategies such as posting content relevant to what is happening in the moment, participating in real-time conversations, including visual content, using a conversational tone, being humorous, posting intentionally provocative content, and framing labour issues as universal concerns.

While the unions were perhaps not the earliest adopters of Facebook and Twitter, they kept pace with the more widespread worldwide adoption of these platforms. CUPE and UFCW joined Facebook in 2008, just ahead of the creation of 'pages' which were

designed to accommodate the growing number of businesses and organizations present on the site, whose needs did not quite fit either the format of personal profiles nor of Facebook's 'groups' (Greenstein, 2009). CUPE, UFCW, and the CLC⁹ were all active users of Twitter by the end of 2009, a year which saw the number of Twitter users grow from 5 to 20 million. The platform reached 100 million users in 2012 and has roughly 330 million users today. However, despite this relatively early onboarding of social media as a part of their communication efforts, almost a decade later these Canadian unions have garnered a relatively low number of followers. Together CUPE, Unifor, and UFCW represent more than a million workers in Canada, and as an umbrella organization, the CLC represents these and an additional two million Canadian workers, yet their combined online following represents less than 3% of these membership numbers. CUPE, Unifor, UFCW, and the CLC have a total of only approximately 31,000 unique followers on Twitter (when one accounts for the roughly 16,000 followers they share), and about 55,000 fans on Facebook (some of whom may also be overlap, however Facebook does not allow the exportation of fan lists in order to cross-reference). When compared to the number of followers that major Canadian employers have, such as Tim Horton's 3 million Facebook fans, or even Bombardier's 100,000 Twitter followers, the social media audience Canadian unions can access is very small, and the potential reach of a union narrative with these numbers seems highly limited.

On the other hand, these unions are achieving above average engagement rates on both platforms. Engagement rates represent the number of followers that interact with a post—either by liking, commenting, or sharing—compared to the number of total followers for the account. And while these unions' average engagement rates of 0.74% on Facebook and 0.14% on Twitter during the observed period may seem low on their own, they are comparatively higher than average. The average engagement rate on Facebook for other non-profit organizations, for example, is 0.27%, and 0.05% on Twitter (Schwartz, 2017). The overall average engagement rate on Facebook is 0.17% and 0.05% on Twitter (ibid.). Significantly however, CUPE, Unifor, UFCW, and the CLC's own engagement with users is almost non-existent. While the unions are keeping pace with platform averages when it comes to posting content—they posted roughly once per day on Facebook, and 2.5 times a day on Twitter during the two month period looked at

⁹ Unifor didn't form as a union until 2013, immediately joining Facebook and Twitter.

in this study—and, as we’ve just seen, they are exceeding average engagement rates from users, their own rates of response were at zero, meaning they do not tend to respond to users’ comments on Facebook nor to mentions on Twitter. This low response rate does not come as a surprise, of course, as the communications staff all lamented the lack of resources available for properly engaging with their social media audience.

The low response rates were not the only measure that fell short of the communications staff’s stated goals. While the interviewees expressed the importance of using discursive language, almost no posts were phrased as questions nor expressly called for comment. And although the staff expressed awareness of Facebook’s algorithmic bias for posts that can be ‘liked,’ more than half of the unions’ content posted on both Facebook and Twitter was not entirely positive. A tweet such as “OMNI denies Chinese language viewers a diversity of voices by contracting out news. #Unifor is pushing back,” for example, might give pause to a user who wants to show support for Unifor’s efforts but who also does not want to ‘like’ or ‘favourite’ the contracting out of news by OMNI. The staff also articulated the importance of posting visual content, and while most of the unions’ posts featured photos or links with embedded graphics, they rarely included video (only 11% of the unions’ Facebook posts included video), a format which studies have shown both platforms give preference to because of the way it sustains users’ attention (Schwartz, 2017). Many of the unions’ posts did have what could be considered a chatty or conversational tone, as the staff had said they strive for, such as this CUPE Facebook post,

Galen Weston says he just doesn't know whether Loblaw will be able to afford the \$190 million a year increase in labour costs that a \$15 minimum wage would bring. Here's an idea: take some of it out the \$1.1 billion Loblaw paid to shareholders (a big portion of which are the Weston family) last year (August 14, 2017).

However, the line between ‘chatty’ or ‘conversational,’ and merely accessible language is not entirely clear, and the majority of the unions’ posts may arguably fall into this latter category, such as this Facebook post by Unifor Canada:

Organizing new members is a process: it requires every part of the union, big or small, to be engaged, to reach out to communities of workers who do not benefit from union membership, and it requires forward thinking. Be a part of it. Unifor’s national Organizing Forum is being held the day before Canadian Council in Winnipeg. You can learn from the country’s best

organizers, the people who have grown Canada's largest union in the private sector (July 26, 2017).

However, even when the posts themselves are relatively accessible, albeit dry, they often link to content that cannot be considered accessible to the average union member, let alone a general audience, which belies their stated claims of mobilizing membership and participating in conversations with the general public.

Nonetheless, as might be expected, CUPE, Unifor, UFCW, and the CLC overwhelmingly frame their posts in language that connects their member's concerns with broader social justice issues. The most successful posts in terms of engagement were those that dealt with these broader social issues—rather than what may be perceived as strictly workers' issues—such as LGBTQ rights, addressing xenophobia, or showing support for the NDP. For example, 9 of the 10 most retweeted tweets across all four Twitter accounts during the observed period were from the launch of a cross-union campaign calling for universal prescription drug coverage;

This #LabourDay, unions are calling for #pharmacare for all Canadians. Add your voice. #cdnhealth #cdnpoli #canlab <https://t.co/8Z40TP1xRm> (@canadianlabour, September 4, 2017).

These most popular tweets also notably contained calls to action with a link provided for users to follow through, such as,

Mark this #LabourDay by signing on for #pharmacare for all Canadians. #cdnpoli #canlab #cdnhealth <https://t.co/l0pmNCdgrq> <https://t.co/PljGB0Wob3> (@canadianlabour, September 2, 2017)

or

This Labour Day, join our call for a universal prescription drug plan for all Canadians. www.aplanforeveryone.ca ([facebook.com/canadianlabour](https://www.facebook.com/canadianlabour), September 3, 2017).

At a more general level, developing a clear understanding of unions' social media impact is difficult, and quantifying that impact is next to impossible. A number of smaller union groups and locals maintain their own social media presence and this makes the overall engagement numbers difficult to determine. Furthermore, the fact that corporations can appeal to simple and immediate commercial incentives (such as contests, coupons, and giveaways) to maintain followers and engagement, means that their numbers are arguably elevated above the actual concern or interest of social media

users. Actual social concern and engagement does not necessarily fit a simple input/output model of social media use. If, for example, Tim Horton's or Swiss Chalet is able to maintain high social media numbers simply because people are looking for short-term deals on coffee and meals, this does not necessarily mean that people are dedicated to these companies or their goals in a meaningful way. Similarly, just because unions cannot incentivise social media users the same way that corporations can, it doesn't necessarily mean that their communications efforts are not having an impact on the prevailing social and political narratives.

3.4. Analysis

A substantial body of prevailing research has suggested a compatibility, if not correspondence, between the potential of social media and union principles, as well as a degree of disharmony between these very principles and actual union social media practice. The primary research conducted here seeks to explore how prominent Canadian unions are using social media, and whether this disharmony takes place in their communication process. Existing research has already pointed to potential tensions between the hierarchical structures of unions and the horizontal structure of social media (e.g. Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015), and some researchers note the potential tensions between the communitarian goals of unions and the privatized interests of social media (e.g. Dencik and Wilkin, 2015). As this chapter will outline below, what emerges from the investigation carried out for this thesis is not only that these tensions are present for these organizations along every point of the communication process, but that these problems appear to exist at the core of both unions' communications and social media design, creating a fraught, yet necessary, relationship. This issue points back to the tension already mentioned above between contradictory operational logics: while social media has become integral to the public sphere, it continues to be a space of public discourse which is inherently manipulated by algorithms which operate in the interest of private, for profit corporations. On the other hand, social media seems to offer a system of connectivity which effectively lines up with the communication and organizing needs of unions, but these institutions face continual ideological and political onslaughts, to which their social media engagement potentially leaves them more exposed, and this may inhibit their ability to take advantage of its benefits.

3.4.1. Unions as Hierarchical vs Social Media as Horizontal

The hierarchies of union operations give rise to various problems and challenges for the labour movement in general and communications strategies in particular. While leadership may fear that digital media pose a threat, these media also offer significant opportunities for reaching members, building new communities, building the capacities of activists, and spreading messages about the important work that unions can do. The degree to which hierarchies in the unions hinder open communication or the engagement of the wider community is not something that is directly measurable. However, the issue of tensions between the operational hierarchies of unions and the horizontal design of social media emerges in various ways in all the interviews, which all suggest that union leadership is directly hindering more effective use of social media and/or neglecting the capacity that is lying fallow in digital medium.

Central Control vs Network Externalities

In *Twitter and Tear Gas*, Tufekci (2017) reminds us of the principle of *network externalities*, also referred to as *network effects*, which she defines as “an increase in benefit from a good or service when the number of people using that good or service goes up” (p.75). As with a union, social media platforms increase in power and potential as more people become involved. The power vis-à-vis an employer, for example, that unions seek to demonstrate through a strength in numbers can be now be demonstrated through online mobilization (Schradie, 2015). Furthermore, as we saw in the previous chapter, studies have shown that supporting a multiplicity of voices online, which serves to unify members and create direct engagement with the public, can be more effective than centralized media relations tactics (e.g. Banks, 2010; Milner, 2012). The efforts of activists to organize and network online could pay incalculable dividends to the long-term goals of unions.

In their 2015 study of social media in union communications globally, Panagiotopoulos and Barnett find that due to unions’ predominantly hierarchical structures, “it is mainly leadership that defines the appropriateness of social media” (p. 526). However, in this thesis’ study of Canadian labour organizations, the interviewees express in a variety of ways that union leadership is not entirely convinced of the importance of social media. The suspicion is alluded to by one staffer, for example, when they describe how “there’s always a back and forth between how much should we

still be doing on paper, how much should we be moving onto our website, how much should we be sharing primarily through Facebook.” Jarrah Hodge, who headed social media and media relations at the CLC, notes that in some unions, “leadership is very fearful about social media.”

Taken together, the interviews suggest that many factors may come into play with regards to leadership’s apprehensions of increasing social media use, including the size and complexity of unions (which creates significant distance between membership and leadership) (Loreto; Thorp), simple demographic or generational differences (Hodge; Loreto), or even the long-term effects of a culture of hostility which could make union leadership hesitant to give the membership a larger communicative role (Hammond; Hodge; Thorp). This last factor would not be surprising; after decades of infiltration and enmity, the idea of handing over communicative power to the rank and file membership could be a potentially worrying prospect for some union activists. This fear is perhaps particularly apt in an arena where the alt-right dominates the practice of trolling.

Hodge expresses some understanding of the causes at the root of these fears, but she also questions the line of reasoning behind the leadership’s reluctance:

I certainly know that there are unions who have issues with certain groups of members setting up unofficial groups and criticizing leadership—that happens for sure but it's not super common. And the other thing to note is first of all, you can't stop them. Like if you don't have an official page they will start an unofficial page so that you might as well have some say in what the space looks like. And also, wouldn't you rather know what people are thinking?

In other words, while there is recognition among union communicators that there may be some historical precedent for reluctance regarding a much more open communications process, policies that aim toward this open process could be important because they harken back to union principles of community and the building of an open space for all voices. Of course, it is difficult to know by the self-expression of the interviewees, who cannot be said to be disinterested observers, to what degree they are making strategic versus principled arguments. The comments above are ambiguous, for example, because she has acknowledged that there will be independent social media presence concerning the union whether the leadership likes it or not, and she simply observes that the union might take ownership over their own account as much as possible in order to facilitate or administer the conversation.

Hodge describes the concern expressed by some participants of the social media workshops she offers through the CLC for union staff, representatives, and members:

A lot of times I have people come to my courses who say ‘you know I really think we need to be on Facebook. I’m here to learn about it but I need to convince my leadership we should be there because they’re afraid that the members will use that to attack us or that the employers or someone else will come and be criticizing us on social media’ (Hodge).

Importantly, this stated fear is also potentially indicative of the centralizing tendency of union structures. One communications staff expresses the string legacy of this centralized attitude: “I know when the website went up it was a big struggle for old leadership—so you’re talking like twelve or fifteen years ago—to understand why it was OK to be talking to members and why it was OK for members to be talking back.” These fears of loss of control might be seen as warranted by some in leadership positions since the increased interactivity of social media inevitably brings a decreased control of messaging. However, Hodge notes:

More and more people are just accepting now we have to be there, that’s where our members are, that’s where the people we’re trying to organize are, we can’t *not* be on social media. [...] We talk about, in organizing and member relations, that you have to go where your members are—in order to build your power or to build your capacity you have to go to where your members are—and that’s the first step and one of those places is social media.

The fact that this is something that needs to be said at all—that the membership is using social media, that people that unions are looking to organize are using social media, therefore the union should be using social media too—already demonstrates a certain disconnect between the leadership and the community. The leadership will have difficulty reflecting the demographic of the people it seeks to represent, organize, and serve if it is not even using the same communication tools as its members and is unsure of the value of those tools. And while opening communications to all of its members presents control issues, it also presents a significant promise of capacity building, as we’ve seen. That everyone has a device in their pocket that gives them access to record, self-publish, and engage in a ubiquitous, potentially global discourse, means that control and centralization of messaging is nearly impossible, but it also means that unions now have the potential to build a vast network of communication which could be mobilized at the click of a button.

The difficulty of maintaining centralized messaging on horizontally designed social media platforms does not appear to be a problem inherent in the media themselves. Corporations, for example, can make effective use of social media with little or no pretense to openness, equity, or democracy. Corporations have often simply adopted a flexible approach to social media use that allows their communications officers to respond to events quickly and relatively unhindered (sometimes referred to as agile marketing) in order to succeed in relatively straightforward sales goal.¹⁰ This is not to suggest that corporations have always been successful with every social media campaign or that they haven't had failures. The point here is that the ultimate goals of the corporation are fairly clear, increased sales and revenue; they only have to have a modicum of success in social media to demonstrate that centralized control can, with the adoption of flexible methods, be adapted to a media that is relatively open and fast moving. However, unions need not only to be open and flexible in their approach, they also need to be perceived to be flexible and open themselves as institutions, as well as needing to be seen to be promoting member and potential member engagement. If, for example, unions fail to open up their digital communications to their members and the wider community who can actively engage and even produce content themselves, unions will continue to risk being perceived as centralized institutions led by a separate and elite group rather than a community of like-minded individuals.

The interviews suggest that not only is this centralized structure, and the leadership's resistance to social media, impeding the mobilization of the membership and the wider public, it is impeding the horizontal network building between unions. The interviewees spoke of a need to disrupt and ultimately break down the hierarchy, particularly in regard to creating more horizontal collaboration between unions. One interviewee observed that "there's not a lot of cooperation between the unions and so that limits how much we're allowed to cooperate with each other, other than like tips and tricks."

There have been some efforts to create more collaboration among unions' communications efforts using social media. Jarrah Hodge at the CLC created a national

¹⁰ For example, Oreo has become known for responding to news headlines in real time on Twitter, inserting the cookie into current events in a comedic way (O'Flynn, 2017). In 2018 Oreo initiated the hashtag #AddOreosImproveAnything which encouraged their followers on Twitter to do the same.

Facebook union communicators group for staff across different unions in Canada, noting that “it's just helpful so we can amplify each other's content.” Such efforts are admirable, but without more structural cooperation this independent, piecemeal approach arguably offers limited promise. Given the remarkable pressures and demands put upon unions, collaboration might lessen workloads. However, as Hodge explains, it may be that very workload that hinders collaboration: “I think some affiliates feel like it's another thing they have to remember and almost universally communications staff feels massively overworked all the time. [...] It would be nice even just if union communicators had a bit more time to talk to each other.” However, this lack of collaboration could also be read as unions’ internalization of the capitalist culture of competition. With Unifor disaffiliating from the CLC ostensibly in order to raid another union, the reality of this competition is clear (Canadian Press, 2018).

As the literature has suggested, horizontal collaboration across unions would certainly help with building the Canadian labour movement’s narrative capacity (e.g. Ross et al., 2015), and social media could be a key tool in presenting a unified front with a unified narrative. This effort should be possible since principles and broad social justice goals are aligned across the unions, despite having to cover different membership. And collaboration, as the communications staff all expressed, is clearly key to building this capacity with social media.

The goal is really making sure that there’s the highest level of collaboration and integration possible. That has to be the goal. You know we can be ten different voices out there with our own messages, which are more likely than not similar or the same, but that would probably be coincidental more than strategic and we need to ensure that we’re always creating some synergy where collectively we are greater than the sum of our parts (Johnstone).

The drive toward centralized messaging by leadership can leave union members out of the communications loop as well as put communications staff in the difficult position of using social media without taking full advantage of its public aspect or its potential for capacity building, or in other words the possibilities for building *network externalities*.

Central Control vs Network Internalities

The potential for capacity building with social media is not only external, the strength of a union also lies in the number of potential competent activists that are involved internally. Union communication staff gain capacity and experience through the efforts of networking and organizing, and one of the most ubiquitous platforms of such networking has become social media. Tufekci (2017) explains this as a principle of what she describes as *network internalities*, or

the benefits and collective capabilities attained during the process of forming durable networks which occur regardless of what the task is, or how trivial it may seem, as long as it poses a challenge that must be overcome collectively and require decision making, building of trust, and delegation among a semi-durable network of people who interact over time (p. 75).

In simpler terms, forming durable networks is, itself, an act of capacity building and offers unions “internal gains achieved by acting in networks over time” (ibid.).

As this section will outline, interviews seem to suggest that at best union leadership is unsure of how to handle social media. It seems that even when leadership chooses to invest in social media, the lack of clarity concerning this communications portfolio has resulted in entrusting some of the work to private communications firms. While this move may indicate that leadership sees the value in social media engagement and recognizes their own shortcomings with regard to these digital platforms, professionalizing the process of social media engagement ignores both the accessibility of the media and the potential for building network internalities. It is not surprising that institutions with a history of centralized control, when those with the central control don't know what to do, overlook their own staff and pass it on to a private firm. If unions fail to expansively open up the realm of social media, and refuse to give a relatively free hand to their own activists to use it freely, they are de facto losing a great deal of their future capacity, which will make any effort at renewal substantially more difficult.

This study reveals that the issues of centralized structures and leadership's reluctance towards social media lead to number of very basic problems for unions in the everyday, nuts and bolts issues of social media usage. As communications staff defend the importance of online networking to union leadership, they continue to look to the leadership for direction on building a stronger social media presence. A commitment to

utilizing social media, at whatever level, would mean relatively little in terms of efficacy without some degree of clear vision concerning goals and planning. However, none of the interviewees seemed to believe that there was a clear mandate from the union concerning how communications departments should be utilizing social media or how the work should ideally be delegated. One interviewee explains,

We don't have a social media plan – so I'm in the process of trying to develop it. And part of where I get stymied is we also don't have a communications plan. Like, as a branch we don't have that. So really the organizing directing document that we have as an organization is the strategic direction that gets presented every two years at convention, and that lays out kind of broadly what the goals are and how we think we might go about achieving them over the next two years. But then we don't really as an institution ever operationalize it. Like specifically, we don't get together and say "Ok we've promised the members we're going to do X, Y, Z – how do we divvy that up between the branches?" We don't do it that way. So everybody kind of moves in the same direction but we're not as strategic about it as we could be [...] in terms of like at an organizational focus, we don't really do that.

These observations suggest that while union leaderships have included social media in their communications processes, this has happened reluctantly and they have not made any serious efforts to orchestrate a clear vision of how it should be used.

Such concerns bring up important questions about unions' approaches and uses of platforms, particularly if they are looking to take an active part in their use and diffusion. Who are unions teaching to use these platforms? Who are they empowering to engage in social media dialogue? These questions are important in their own right, but operational concerns also arise out of the enhanced use of social media because these platforms require plurality and interactivity which means that efficient management and use of social media may not be something that can be simply added to the work of existing communications positions, but may require new employees dedicated exclusively to engaging in those conversations.

According to the interviewees, there is clear dearth of resources committed by unions to the social media field. And even when some resources are there, the way those resources are distributed appears to be making social media utilization difficult. The unions in this study have either been adding a single position to take care of social media, tacking social media onto existing workloads, or taking people whose expertise might be media relations and assigning them to social media relations as though it is the

same thing. These facts demonstrate a lack of clarity concerning the nature of social media and the kind of engagement it requires. Even where union leadership has begun to embrace social media use, this operational resource issue poses serious problems.

Unifor's director of communications said that if they had more resources they could attain significantly higher levels of engagement and success from their social media efforts.

We don't have a single person in our department that is solely dedicated to building and hosting an online community, so it's something that we all do, in addition to all the other tasks that we have. If we had someone that was dedicated I think it would probably be a little bit easier to set a higher benchmark (Hammond).

Hammond was not the only one who believed that the way resources are directed in communications was a key issue:

I think that we could do better working together to have conversations with people on our pages because too often we put something out and we're just—like I usually don't have the time to do more than read the comments, I don't have time to really engage with people (Hodge).

Even with resources being directed towards a social media effort, unless there is an understanding of the unique way it needs to be used in contrast with other communications efforts, then efforts and resources might be wasted. As Nora Loreto, the editor at the Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM) explains,

Internally, communications departments need to identify who is best suited to do this kind of work because it is a reality that it might be generational, but it's not necessarily just that, a lot of it is personality. But the problem is that what you get is—you get ego. And so then all of a sudden it's: "oh no that's not your job, that's my job," right. And it's like OK, some of us are actually just better at the social media world than others. But what does being better actually look like? Is responding quickly something that we value as a union? And not all unions value that.

Reluctance to wholeheartedly embrace social media may be understandable for various reasons. However, the piecemeal acceptance and use of social media is bound to reduce their effectiveness. Unions are still facing the challenge of educating people in the union on the use of a platform that their members and potential members already use, often with a high degree of fluency. This problem is magnified as a result of the speed with which the social media world changes. The CLC, as an umbrella organization

attempting to support Canadian unions, seeks to provide workshops and training for union communications specialists on effective use of the platforms, but, as Hodge explains,

we quickly found the challenge is that the platforms change so fast that I can't really write a curriculum because it's going to be different in three to four months. [...] And the range of skills in the class is like there will be people who are really quite experienced and people who have never touched a social media platform, so it makes it a bit challenging to be able to you know develop a course that will appeal to everyone.

The fact that unions may be facing the problem of training significant numbers of people who have “never touched a social media platform,” is further evidence of how much this hesitation towards social media may be causing unions to lag behind.

The lack of clarity and understanding on the part of leadership concerning this communications portfolio has resulted in outsourcing some of the social media work to private communications firms. Interviewees at Unifor, UFCW, CLC, and CALM all mentioned their unions outsourcing at least a portion of the work, from video or graphics, to more guiding roles:

Now on top of that we have an extensive communications plan that we work from, a strategic plan that actually I've invited an outside agency to counsel us on. Not that—well I'm not going to say not that we need it, I think everybody needs it—it is just a fresh set of eyes that I think is a good exercise for an organization to have come in every few years and whether or not we take the advice is up to us. But I think it's a really important exercise and I'm in the midst of doing that right now (Johnstone).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Dencik and Wilkin (2015) refer to this tendency on the part of unions to outsource communications work as a “professionalization” approach, rather than an organizing approach.

It is unclear to what degree this professionalization approach to social media is one that reflects a failure to understand the possibilities and importance of the work on the one hand, or a simple reflection of the hierarchical structure on the other. Unions of course already have at their disposal not only a professional, in-house, communication staff, but countless member activists who are already on social media platforms. As noted above, everyone has a device in their pocket that gives them access to record, and self-publish, which often leaves so-called professionals playing continual catch-up, yet, as the interviewees expressed, the leadership has seen fit to increasingly outsource

their communications efforts. There is cultural rift between this professionalized culture and the relatively open culture of social media which is not powered by expertise but by speed and accessibility. In other words, the centralization of communications efforts, as well as their increased professionalization and outsourcing, carry important implications about how unions are unwittingly losing a great deal of their organizing potential. While, the tendency towards outsourcing may, at first glance, appear to conflict with the institution's drive toward centralized messaging, it doesn't. Given the pressures of the market, unions leaders may, in fact, be able to exercise greater control over outsourced firms because they are fulfilling a specific contract, while union employees are often previous members with a long history of activism which have allowed them to establish their own ideas of goals and operations.

The delimiting of the active involvement of members from the process of communications might offer some short-term gain in relation to particular campaigns, or with respect to message control, but the long-term impact is robbing the union of its inherent capacity as well as risking the potential alienation of new members who are part of the precariat and are themselves suspicious of centralized and professionalized communications. This was a key concern for Nora Loreto at CALM, who provides support to Canadian unions' communication efforts;

There's been a proliferation of people outsourcing their communications or massively increasing their internal communications capacity to try and project the feeling that everything's OK. So like with really slick communications, with a really big ad buy, with commercials, we can make it look like everything's OK. What that has done is it's created a situation where some of the best union communications work is actually outside of unions. It's in PR agencies. [...] There's a professionalization of communications that happens where average people don't think that they can be communications people or communicators. And that's very dangerous because communications is actually very easy.

Networking and capacity building has always been the primary education process for union activists and the professionalization of communications threatens that process. Furthermore, failure to take advantage of the experience building capacity of social media is a fairly clear impoverishment of unions. The interviewees frequently mention that union activists are searching for workshops on the subject of digital technology, which suggests that unions are considerably underperforming in regard to this kind of capacity building. As Loreto explains,

We always have requests at our conference to hear more about live streaming, smartphone activism, good picture taking, like 'what's a tip for a really good picture taking.' We're doing a full day conference on sound editing—all super old content. But people have no idea how to use Audacity or Garage Band, and then the second you learn how to use Audacity it's not really that much more difficult to put photos or to put images over top of it, or actually start editing film. That stuff is really important, and I think that's again part of the professionalization problem. It's made to seem really difficult and out of people's reach but actually everyone has [what they need]—it's like you know that's a professional level microphone in your cell phone, so are you using it? How do you use it? How do you reduce background noise? How do you cut it together? What do you use it for?

What this discussion suggests is that while there is a gradual recognition of the importance, and even potential, of social media as a communication tool, there is little recognition of social media as a capacity builder. And, if this is true, it speaks directly to what may be the central shortcoming of unions regarding social media usage. By professionalizing and outsourcing the use of social media, unions are seeing social media in very limited, straightforwardly communicative terms rather than as an opportunity to expand the capacity of new generation of potential activists.

On the one hand, while it is their job to operationalize the communications goals of the union, leadership is resistant to their push for broader social media engagement. And when leadership decides to invest in social media communications, they look past their own staff. There is little doubt that these unions have marginalized this kind of work despite its potential dividends. And typical of marginalized work, an undue amount of it is the responsibility of women. Again, Loreto didn't hesitate to underline this point,

There's a reason why this is all made up of women, these are not powerful groups of people. In fact, communications staff have such little power and are always doing secretarial work to clean up or put forward the message of men in power. When you generalize that across the entire labour movement, you get exactly what we're talking about. You know like you're stuck, or not taken seriously, or your opinions don't matter, or "oh OK yeah sure we've got a department of experts, of communication experts, but we're going to go hire this guy's PR firm because I hear he's good." You know, like, fuck.

Member Focus vs Social Justice Narrative

The hierarchies of union operations give rise to various problems and challenges for the labour movement in general, and communications strategies in particular. Even

though digital media may pose a greater challenge to unions, these media also offer significant opportunities for reaching members, building new communities, building the capacities of activists, and spreading messages about the important work that unions can do. However, when it comes to spreading that message on social media, interviewees confess to feeling operationally conflicted about communicating with members about everyday issues on the one hand, and spreading their net wider to engage with the community in general on the other. Furthermore, there is a tendency for communications efforts to get redirected toward a focus on union leadership, a process that takes the efforts away from both the membership and the wider community.

Obviously, the engagement of members is one of the primary routes to greater union success, but a wider engagement in social media is a vital mode for this expansion because it means creating and spreading social justice narratives with the long-term goal of shifting peoples' ideas and impressions about unions in general. The logic of network externalities means getting as many people connected as possible, which means expanding the potential for a strong narrative capacity by emphasizing the universality of union issues, and making it clear in the public sphere that they are social justice issues.

In the current sociopolitical context, it is easy for people to overlook the basic social justice import of union issues. The statements of principles found in the constitutions of groups like the CLC as well as the major unions, reiterate in strong terms the underlying social goals that unions are founded upon, such as "basic human rights, good democratic government, a safe sustainable environment, and a peaceful world" (CLC, 2014). Communications officers of course play an important part in practical efforts to defend their members in the public sphere, but they also carry the torch on the wider social effort, particularly through social media:

Our department helps to drive the priority objectives of the union, in terms of creating a positive image for unions, being able to put forward a progressive voice in Canada to defend workers and human rights, and build a more socially just world, and third, in terms of being able to engage, inform, and educate our own membership - and also workers and members of the community about unions and why they are fundamental to a just society (Hammond).

The interviews highlighted the effort at balancing and connecting the concerns of workers with the wider social justice concerns, with interviewees demonstrating an

understanding that this is a key narrative framework on which the unions could build their strength online:

For several years the CLC, with the 'Together Fairness Works' campaign, has been mandated to work on trying to show the value of unions to all Canadians and to change some of the perceptions that are there about unions—you know, the negative perceptions that unions are outdated, or that unions are exclusive, that we only help our members. [...] The primary concern is trying to demonstrate that unions do things that make life better for all Canadians. So things like working on minimum wage, or health and safety, that don't just help union members (Hodge).

Interviews suggest that the effort of untangling the misconception that the interests of the labour movement are narrow and specific to a union's already-organized workers, is one of the primary projects that communications departments have to handle if they are going to be concerned with gaining wider support and participating in public discourse. When pressed to discuss the approach and strategy for social media to present this narrative, interviewees' emphasis was overwhelmingly on member focus, reflecting a clear belief regarding who the union's primary audience is: "Our primary audience is our own staff and electeds [...] and affiliates and prominent union activists" (Hodge); "our union is driven by the needs of our members [...] maybe it's a 60/40 split, a 70/30 split, [membership focus vs public focus]" (Hammond); "top of the pyramid is of course our own membership" (Johnstone). The interviews revealed a number of ways within which the union structure is talked about in decidedly corporate terms with members playing the role of customers in corporate speak:

We're constantly trying to engage our membership with the goal to mobilize them in their own workplace, because at the end of the day the tangible that we provide to them is a collective agreement and through that collective agreement we believe we improve the lives of workers. That's the thing, at the end of the day the product, if you will, that we provide them is a union contract (Johnstone).

These quotes demonstrate the tension between union activists as members of a kind of workplace service industry and the background goals that are implied by the traditional union objective of seeking to bring about a society of social and economic equality without exploitation. Against the backdrop of corporate pressures, any efforts to build a narrative in public discourse that connects worker issues with broader social justice issues presents a serious challenge that must be worked on from both ends, not only by changing narratives about unions in the broader community, but getting the

support of membership to do this work. Of course, only an overly corporate paradigm will allow that these concerns are entirely separable, and even union activists who are partly driven by a service approach seem to recognize the need for the promotion of broader discourse.

Because if we were not speaking out against racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, in the broader community, then how could we be a voice and a champion within the workplace? We can't separate what happens in the workplace from the broader world (Hammond).

Thus, even if union employees are susceptible to a corporate mindset of unions selling a product to members, all the interviewees seemed to be aware that an essential part of their power is in mobilizing the membership to be part of a progressive movement in the broader community.

We need to engage the membership at all times to, number one, know they're part of a union; number two, know what that means; know that part of being part of a community has certain rights, but also certain obligations. And what we're trying to do really is hopefully encourage our members to be activists, yes in the workplace, but also you know better citizens, and that being engaged goes beyond the workplace (Johnstone).

Interviewees suggested that their membership is generally very supportive of this social unionism approach, and some of the unions have specifically dedicated resources toward broader social issues, as well as to the relationships these unions have developed with other NGOs around these issues. When it came to discussing the ways these unions engage on social media, it was clear that the primary focus of the union will always be its members, but members are part of the community, and what's good for the community is good for workers, thus the staff expressed the need to present a more general sense of communitarianism online.

I think helping to drive an agenda of a progressive politics that support workers and the working class—we do that by participating in the public discourse whether that's through social media, through advertisement, through presentations, research briefs and summaries. But being able to engage helps us to mobilize both members and the broader public to be influential. And so, you know if we weren't engaging in a political discourse in some way then I'm not sure that we would be fairly representing our members and helping to create better living and working conditions (Hammond).

Derek Johnstone, who oversees the communication effort at UFCW, talked about it in terms of narratively demonstrating the way these concerns overlap, “part of it is

demonstrating relevance, which in this day and age has value to members and hopefully soon-to-be members, and really trying to emphasize similarities in values and aspirations.” For UFCW, whose membership is made up in large of part of younger workers, many of whom are women, this communitarian discourse means talking about the wage gap, rising cost of tuition, lower opportunities for the millennial generation, and other broader social issues.

This overlap between specific membership needs and wider social goals, makes it difficult to measure, when looking at what unions post, what the union is intending to highlight and, ultimately, whether splitting those categories has any value. In the long run, it would be valuable to look at is how these unions translate their concerns in order to sound as universal as possible—and to what degree they are posting in a way that seems to presume a certain amount of insider understanding. However, it continues to be unclear, given even their own lack of clarity on such matters, whether such an undertaking could be successfully completed.

At a more practical level, it might just be that communications officers are making a fairly simple mistake in terms of the focus of their messages: “I think that unions often maybe over-profile their leadership on social media instead of focusing on the membership, not realizing that it's their members' stories that are going to appeal to the public and to engage members” (Hodge). This problem was partly confirmed by the fact that a significant number of posts among the ones analyzed for this thesis, across all unions, consisted of promoting the union's president.

When you do everything through the perspective of the president then who's speaking on behalf of your members? They'll say, “well the president is members” —like, not really. That person should be commenting on stuff all the time, sure, but there is a lot of PR that is done just to promote the president of an organization in general and it's like you folks don't have that kind of bandwidth or the access to air time necessary for that to be a good use of your time (Loreto).

Ultimately, this focus on leadership, is indicative of the wider problem of engagement, with both union members and the public in general. The tension between the need to focus on “selling” the union to existing members and addressing their everyday concerns on the one hand, and the need to expand their focus and thus shift the social narrative in the public sphere, is not one that can be addressed easily. When it

comes to social media, however, the capacity for narrative framing and general outreach seems considerable, if only unions are able to take advantage of it.

3.4.2. Unions as Social Organizations vs the Corporatism of Social Media

While union hierarchies appear to be hindering open communication or the engagement of the wider community, there are technical challenges of social media that may be contributing to these problems as well. Efforts to increase these unions' exposure on Facebook and Twitter gets communications staff drawn into corporate mechanisms which are, in some senses, anathema to the social goals of unions. And while social media platforms may provide clear indicators of success, such as quantity of likes or shares, these measures are not directly transferable as indicators of unions' success as social organizations.

In the long run, all institutions which regularly use social media and come to depend upon it as a central part of their public profile, are probably bound to be caught between the drive to produce vital, meaningful content and the tempting satisfaction that comes from intentionally producing glitzy and provocative material simply to amass followers and procure "clicks." Because social media is largely dependent on advertising dollars, it is operationally oriented toward quantifying people's attention. Thus, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter tailor their algorithms – the equations that manage the distribution of content – to sustaining attention, such as emphasizing visual (and particularly video) content, and promoting posts that have garnered likes and comments from users. When describing their best practices, communication staff were often really describing the best practices for playing to these algorithms. However, as we've seen, unions continue to fail even at these practices they've already recognized, such as making posts 'shareable', 'likeable', or calling for comment. One possibility highlighted by the research conducted for this thesis is that this failure is due to the union's desire to promote qualitative goals rather than being concerned with the quantitative requirements that social media platforms, at present, clearly possess.

The built-in quantification of likes, shares, favourites, comments, and retweets which appear publicly on a post are the primary mechanisms that impact how much exposure a post will receive on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Besides these clear and public mechanisms, these platforms can offer detailed back-door analytics on the

performance and reception of each post or tweet. Communications staff all talked about using these analytics to demonstrate the reach of social media to the leadership and encourage investment in it. However, though not everyone in the labour community is entirely comfortable with this quantitative strategy, they realize that it offers them useful information. As one staff put it, “You know, all the things I thought were evil about Facebook I really like now. ‘Oh, this many women looked at the post, fantastic!’ I mean it's horrible. It's a very different perspective.”

These quantifiable engagement statistics insidiously encourage unions, like many organizations, to pay to have their posts obtain a wider or more particular reach. When they pay to “boost” their posts, they are rewarded with improved numbers of engagement on their post. Thus, unions aiming to expand their online community are tempted to spend money for the privately-owned platforms. “Of the top fifteen posts from the last three months, I think fourteen of them were paid, were boosted,” a communications staffer confirmed. The question then becomes, they lamented, “how much money can we give Facebook and what will they do for us? It feels impossible to get through the chatter without paying them [...] it feels like a bribe.” And while media analytics may be a corporate tool, it seems to be having real impact on what unions are doing:

Part of that [growth in membership] I'd like to believe is that in a lot of ways we are a twenty first century union. I think the way we tend to communicate with workers is in keeping with this century. Is there any way for me to tease that out? Not exactly. I will tell you though that in terms of the organizing and leads that are generated by our union, has grown significantly over the last ten years. And in keeping with that trend, more and more are being generated digitally, and I can track all of that of course. So, our communications efforts, especially our digital efforts, and our social [media] efforts [are] being weighted more and more by the leading search engines of course, are all having a direct bearing on growing our union (Johnstone).

Regardless of the access unions might have to these analytics, the underlying algorithms governing a social media post remain opaque however:

On a big level we have, I think, a very good understanding but in terms of like really granular analytics we're not there yet. We will do Facebook post by post, we'll look at it and see what's working, see what's hitting and see what's not. Sometimes it's surprising. I mean some things are obvious and then, every once in a while, you'll get something that's a huge hit, no idea why. Who knows. So, trying to replicate it feels impossible and the level at

which we're looking at the analytics isn't going to tell us enough. I don't know if there is anything that would tell you enough. Yeah sometimes it's just a mystery.

This may be because while there are ways in which these quantitative measurements serve the union, much of what this thesis has discussed in the union renewal literature, in the constitutions, and in the interviews, has been about qualitative goals that social media is at pains to measure.

We're focused very much on quality versus quantity in terms of our networks. [...] And I certainly have ambitious targets in terms of the growth of those networks, but I'm not going to grow just for the sake of growth. We view them as communities and we're trying to develop them as communities (Johnstone).

The problem in making sense of the analytics leads some communications offices to dismiss the value of the numbers completely.

You know we don't often sort of say [...] I'm going to post today about education—I want to make sure I get like, a thousand likes. We don't often do that sort of benchmark and setting of goals. We do look at it on a weekly basis in terms of, you know, what sort of trends or where we have more interest and consider the reasons why—was it about the issue? was it about the way that it was demonstrated? was it [...] concerning the time? [...] is it about the political discourse in the world that makes people sort of connect with it in some way? and do some analysis of how to better reach or form and provide information for members that speak to their needs and interests (Hammond).

But despite the fact that questions of quantity might conflict with issues of quality, ignoring the benchmarks might mean neglecting what is encouraging people to look in the first place, and it might inhibit the deeper engagement unions are seeking.

“How you measure advancements in social justice, I don't know,” Johnstone confessed, considering these long standing and complex issues of measurability and how one applies quantitative standards to what are essentially qualitative questions. Despite the fact that, over the long term, one can apply various quantitative standards to questions of social justice (including rates of literacy, higher education access, poverty, economic equality, etc.), these measurable rates change relatively slowly, and it is not always clear which social efforts are paying the dividends. Perhaps more importantly from the union perspective is that many issues that are integral to labour are not so easily measurable, including issues such as job satisfaction, what impact the union has

had on people's social involvement and economic independence, how they have been motivated to seek better education or more satisfying employment, etc. The union might be able to measure how many people looked at a given social media post, but it may be impossible to know how those posts have impacted people. One communications staff observed that it would be "great if we had really clear goals and ways of measuring them." However, in regard to these wider social issues, goals cannot be entirely fixed, and measurability may take decades to emerge. Even getting a clear idea of the impression that the union's social media campaign is having is difficult to ascertain. Jarrah Hodge at the CLC admitted that it is difficult to know "if union members or the public are seeing what unions do on social media and how they think it's going. Like are they having a generally positive impression or is it just not helping at all, like totally irrelevant to them?" Instead, she says "you feel like you're operating in a bit of a vacuum" (Hodge).

Even if measurability were not a serious problem, the sheer volume of information on social media may continue to be. There is so much noise on social media, so many people involved posting and reacting to so many things that it is impossible to predict what will be heard, when, and by whom. "In a context in which technologies allow for vast numbers of people to add their 'voice' to campaigns, getting 'heard' has become one of the internet's biggest paradoxes" (Dencik & Wilkin, 2015, p. 90). As a result, there is a perhaps inevitable disconnect (at least at the level of perception) between actions and results in a social media context.

In her exposé of algorithmic control across all aspects of civic life, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, mathematician Cathy O'Neil (2016) argues that, "while Facebook may feel like a modern town square, the company determines, according to its own interests, what we see and learn on its social network" (p.180). The same is true of Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit, among other platforms. While these sites strive to tailor their algorithms to suit the interests of advertisers, progressive organizations such as unions which hope to utilize the platforms are driven to modify their message in order to cope with the market-driven logics of these platforms. While it is one thing to tailor a message for the sake of one's own ideological promotion, it is entirely another to feel compelled to do the same thing to work within structural and operational tendencies that have the power to bury your message. Facebook's decision to prioritize the 'Like' button, for example, may be tailored to the need to protect advertisers' content from receiving

negative responses, but it also forces organizations such as unions to reframe messages of discontent into positive content that can be 'liked.' For example, a charity effort like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge ends up receiving a great deal more exposure than, say, the demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, for the simple reason that the hopeful and entertaining visual content of the Ice Bucket Challenge is algorithmically-friendly because it generates more "likes." The content coming out of Ferguson, on the other hand, was too upsetting to be 'liked' and left people speechless "despite intense interest" (Tufekci, p. 138).

Besides this question of tailoring a message to being 'liked,' while algorithmic feedback loops mean that once a story gains notoriety it will dominate our news feeds, it also means that once a story is buried at the bottom of Facebook feeds, it is likely doomed to stay there. Furthermore, as the surprise appearance on the streets of white supremacist groups which have been growing for years online has demonstrated, these feedback loops also lend to social siloing. "As soon as I hit send," O'Neil (2016) explains, "that [post] belongs to Facebook, and the social network's algorithm makes a judgement about how best to use it. It calculates the odds that it will appeal to each of my friends" (p. 179). In other words, we are primarily shown the posts and opinions that these platforms have already determined we agree with, the ones we will most likely give our attention, our 'thumbs up.' Additionally, an algorithmic comment bias means that anytime there is a conflict in a comment section, the post will rise to top of our feeds, making certain issues seem more polarized than they really are, since we are less likely to comment on something with which we agree.

For the labour movement, these confirmation-bias structures mean that attempts to try and change the public narrative around unions via social media run the risk of futility if their posts are only visible to those who already support the labour union effort. For those who are least likely to support a union message, the only posts they may see from the labour movement are those that have garnered intense debate. When a union's social media effort is not gaining traction, the union "can't know whether the message is being buried or just not resonating with people" (Thorp). Even successes are difficult to learn from "every once in a while, you'll get something that's a huge hit [with] no idea why. Who knows. So, trying to replicate it feels impossible."

For activists, and for those in the labour movement in particular, other social media policies create further complications. Facebook, for example, has a policy that users must use their real names. This poses an obvious challenge for a union member who may want to post about unfair working conditions without fear of reprisals at work. Because these policies are predominantly community-policed (in order to keep the platform's staffing costs at an absolute minimum), the profiles with the most visibility are those most likely to get reported as violating the 'real name' policy. And while a protesting employee may want to keep their efforts as public as possible for the sake of the cause, an employer frustrated with these public complaints against its practices can simply flag the account holder as a 'fake.' In fact, false reporting is a very common tactic of attack on activists (Tufekci, 2017), and being banned from a platform like Facebook means being excluded from a huge element of possible discourse in the public sphere. Another silencing tactic activists face is harassment. On a platform like Twitter, which does not require any identity verification, harassments can pour into an activist's mentions with no other recourse than to report each individual incident and wait for one of the relatively few platform staff to review the claim. And of course, the staff reviewing the claims tend to approach their decisions with the necessary bias of a corporate-employed white man.¹¹ These injustices are, as Cathy O'Neil (2016) puts it, "what happens when an immensely powerful network we share with 1.5 billion users is also a publicly traded corporation," (p. 180).

Getting Through the Noise: Fake News and the Power of Distraction

While traditional media, such as print, radio, and television have the ability to touch many people at once, those mass media have had significant barriers to entrance, and very limited ability to create audience discourse within the medium itself. The barriers to entrance in terms of equipment, cost, and regulation, means that these mass media are (and have more or less always been) corporate or state-dominated by nature, meaning that only large enterprises can utilize them. Internet based media also have the ability to touch very large numbers of people, but with the additional advantages of having few barriers to entrance and being able to create actual discourse within the medium itself.

¹¹ More than 75% of those employed by tech companies in Silicon Valley are men, and a majority of those men are white (CNN Money, 2018).

These elements give social media the impression of operating at a unique level of intimacy for an informational medium.

However, this sense of direct access and discourse appears to not actually function very effectively in the widespread use of social media in general. In fact, many commentators have been shocked by the passive manner in which many people engage in a medium that, in principle, is interactive and offers users a context in which information is easily investigated and challenged (Gladstone and Garfield, 2018). The phenomenon of “fake news,” which seems to have played a role in last year’s American presidential election and continues to play a role in politics worldwide, is a case in which hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people passively accept and pass on false information, which is sometimes easily verifiable, or falsifiable, with little discourse (Channel 4 News, 2018). The ease with which this deception seems to occur brings into question the very notion of social media as an intimate, discursive medium, an idea that many in the literature have suggested is central to union renewal in general.

These facts undermine what seems to have been an early utopian vision of the internet (even by unionists); a vision that imagined not only that the internet would be an intimate, people-powered field of endeavor, but that it would be a fair, impartial place where traditional fields of bigotry and prejudice such as race and gender wouldn’t matter (e.g. Belanger, 1992; Lee, 2000). That utopian vision assumes both that our everyday selves would not simply be reflected in our online selves and that what we said online wouldn’t affect our physical reality (Tufekci, 2017). Rather, the failings and prejudices that people bring to the internet appear to be organically expressed in the platforms to which the internet gives rise, in other words, “pre-existing human dynamics occur online” (ibid., p. 164). Thus, if people did not come to social media as curious and investigative, there is little reason to be surprised when they fail to check the veracity of certain kinds of information that they find there, particularly information that serves to confirm certain fundamental and long-standing beliefs. Likewise, if people were not prone to an attitude of open and discursive public interactions, it is hardly surprising that they don’t display such behavior online.

However, “the internet is not a separate virtual world” to which people simply bring their prejudices and bias, and “it is also not a mere replica of an offline one that is just a little faster and bigger” (ibid., p. 131). We cannot conclude the complete neutrality of

social media platforms from the fact that people continue to be themselves online. While social media have not created a new kind of human nature,

the dynamics of the public sphere are intertwined with power relations, social structures, institutions, and technologies that change over time. [...] As technologies change, and as they alter the societal architectures of visibility, access, and community, they also affect the contours of the public sphere, which in turn affect social norms and political structures (ibid., p. 6).

In other words, technology is socially constructed, but once we have constructed it, it in turn also has structuring power. This means that social media could generate, and appears to in fact be generating, unexpected and potentially dangerous opinions and even political movements that create social conflicts and chaos rather than the social solidarity that union activists would have hoped for.

Given that about two-thirds of American adults have a profile on Facebook, and that nearly half of them, according to a Pew research centre report, count on Facebook to deliver at least some of their news, even the slightest distortion (even if this is simply a result of activists trying to make their posts more appealing) of the popularity of, or concern about, a particular event can have an overwhelming impact on what people perceive to be “real,” which sheds some light on the influence of social media in the spreading of fake news (O’Neil, 2016, p. 182).

You might argue that newspapers have exerted similar power for eons. Editors pick the front-page news and decide how to characterize it. [...] These choices can no doubt influence both public opinion and elections. The same goes for Television news. But when the New York Times or CNN covers a story, everyone sees it. Their editorial decision is clear, on the record. It is not opaque. And people later debate (often on Facebook) whether that decision was the right one. Facebook is more like the Wizard of Oz: we do not see the human beings involved. When we visit the site, we scroll through updates from our friends. The machine appears to be only a neutral go-between. Many people still believe it is. In 2013, when a university of Illinois researcher conducted a survey on Facebook’s algorithm, she found that 62 percent of the people were unaware that the company tinkered with the news feed (Ibid., p. 183).

Besides the problem of the spread of fake news, social media platforms have also been struggling with the problem of a proliferation of fake profiles. Whether it is in an effort to create the appearance of having people’s attention through fake followers, or in an effort to create distraction through fake comments and posts, ‘bots’ – or computer-programmed profiles – are spreading online (Confessore et al., 2018). Facebook, the

world's largest social media platform, recently disclosed that it has up to 60 million such automated accounts on its platform (ibid.). The strategy of buying bots to create a semblance of a large following has been adopted by reality television stars, professional athletes, comedians, TED speakers, pastors and models on the one hand (ibid.); and on the other hand, political parties and governments worldwide are learning to create strategically-timed distractions with the use of bots (Cooper, 2018).

After having to stand before the U.S. Congress to answer questions concerning the Russian-linked posts that appear to have influenced the country's 2016 elections, Facebook has announced yet another set of changes to their algorithms (ibid.). These changes will now give preference to posts shared by friends over those shared by media and other organizations (ibid.). This change, which some say indicates Facebook's naïveté (ibid.), is likely to make it even harder than ever before for organizations like unions—along with legitimate, and particularly independent, media—to make it through the chatter. While unions clearly struggle with their own internal tensions, ones which cause friction in their use of social media, social media themselves are facing the tension of being privately owned public spheres.

3.5. Conclusion

The inconsistencies in the social media communication process seem to grow both out of structural necessity and active failures on the part of unions. The structural pressures of corporate imperatives and algorithmic patterns make it difficult for union communicators to break through with any pure messages or communitarian intent. Furthermore, unions have simply too often failed to effectively address their principles of equity and community engagement in their communications and have starved their own communicators of the resources and tools necessary to put such principles into communicative action.

The labour movement has always faced serious challenges, both from within and without. The question of just how radical unions should be in the face of an exploitative socioeconomic structure, or to what degree they should work within the system to simply improve the lives of their members, is an enduring one that shows no sign of being alleviated even as capitalism reaches new levels of crisis and inequality, and unions attempt to place themselves in a position to renew and relaunch. In a context where the

labour movement is on the defensive however, “no one has time for reflection and thought. It's all about, you know, my God, this attack, this attack, this attack, respond now, respond now” (Loreto). And even when unions can win a particular labour battle, they are left with little time or resources to fight the larger war for social justice, even when they really would like to engage in this fight.

It seems almost trivial to say that an organization's operational structure will be reflected in how it performs its public communications. However, that many large corporations which are shockingly brutal and hierarchical in many parts of their structure and performance can appear open and improvised in their communications strategies suggests that organizations' performance does not always match their public image. Monitoring the use of social media by unions raises obvious and difficult questions about measurability and effectiveness in relation to the issue of labour movement renewal in the early twenty-first century. Obviously, measurable upticks in union membership would give us some indication of labour's raw success on the path to renewal. However, such data would give us little or no indication of the more abstract, and less quantifiable, questions concerning issues such as transparency, accountability, or equality of representation.

Similarly, abstract shifts in the ideological principles that affect institutions such as unions are not easily quantified. Representatives of the World Bank and IMF, major political leaders, and a growing number of economists are calling for a larger role for unions in the face of what many perceive to be a growing crisis of capitalism expressed by the long-term stagnation of real wages and startling increases in economic inequality (Jaumotte and Buitron, 2015). Though we can reasonably assume that these facts indicate a significant shift in the ideological backdrop of capitalism, they are not measurable indicators by any means. If we assume that changes in the ideological/economic outlook of the movers and shakers of politics and economics play out in changes in the way the political and economic structure is organized, then we can also assume that, over the long-term, the shift in discourse that we are witnessing will have some effect on the success that institutions such as unions will have over the next generation. However, any such success is over-determined and occurs at multiple socioeconomic sites over the course of many years and is therefore only properly measurable and understood in hindsight.

Returning to Michael Denning's notion of *The Cultural Front*, we can see the obvious difficulties in understanding the impact of ideological and cultural shifts on the everyday lives of workers. The Cultural Front was part of an organic growth in the social conscience of North America, and while artists, intellectual, and activists knew that they were fighting for greater socioeconomic justice in the face of a harsh brand of capitalism, they could not, as individuals, have a clear sense of what role they were playing in the larger historical process, nor where their activism would take them (Denning, 1996). Nassim Taleb's (2007) *Black Swan* theory points to the difficulties in coherently understanding complex historical changes, not only while they are taking place but after they have occurred. The changes that occurred in mid-twentieth-century capitalism were, arguably, not predictable, and the reaction to these changes by activists were based on the daily struggles of individuals. There is always a danger of rationalizing them in hindsight, as well as applying specific kinds of consciousness and awareness that did not necessarily obtain for the people involved. Similarly, as we look at the possibilities for union renewal against the backdrop of what is, arguably, a shifting ideological paradigm, we are continually in danger of applying macro-motives to individual actions that may not be related, in any conscious way, to the over-arching changes in economic or political beliefs. Obviously, there is no intention here of addressing the wider academic and intellectual problems raised by the issues of structuralism, but it is important for any inquiry into the changes in the labour movement (whether related to the use of social media or any other issue) to acknowledge the limitations presented by piecemeal analysis of union related social or political actions.

Methodologically, if we measure an increase in labour related social media (that is to say, official union-posting, as well sharings and repostings, and non-official labour postings), we can reasonably assume that this indicates some level of union success in the renewal process. However, the real success of the labour movement in achieving long term goals such as increased levels of health and safety, job satisfaction, or decreases in economic inequality, are more difficult to determine and only measurable over the long-term. One example of union related success is the recent movement for increases in minimum wage laws in North America. Union activists have been integrally involved in these movements both on the ground and on the internet and it is reasonable to assume that legislative changes in many North American constituencies are an

indication of labour's measurable success. However, many more abstract union goals offer no such quantifiable indicators.

But these abstract problems must be measured against the myriad individual challenges faced by labour activists. Not only must each struggle be fought individually but they must be fought within a certain organization which plays by its own rules, making the problems considerably more challenging overall. As Johnstone observed "each union has its own culture, each union has its own structure, each union has its own governance model, each union has its own objectives, its own goals." And even though there are umbrella groups that act to assist unions and activists in their efforts, such assistance is definitely limited in scope. Nora Loreto observed that "it would be completely foolish for me to imagine that from my thirty hours a week, that I could try and steer a ship that includes you know CUPW and CUPE National and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees, and the staff at a small hospital in rural Ontario."

Ultimately, perhaps union activists and communicators face far too many daily challenges to effectively engage in wider social struggles in any regular and compelling way. And one of the problems that my research has highlighted is that those communicating for the union have little power concerning how the union is organized and operates on a wider scale, so their knowledge and experience is not always as useful as it could be. Furthermore, the largest unions like CUPE, UFCW, and Unifor are so unwieldy that they would have trouble offering a unified national message even if they wanted to.

It seems fairly clear that the future of the unions and the possibility of labour's renewal relies on their ability to respond to monumental changes in the workforce and technology. To be perceived as open, grassroots, responsive organizations, however, unions are going to have to undertake some degree of reform, particularly to attract younger workers who have little sense of the historical achievements which unions have brought about, achievements that have improved lives overall but which many people now take for granted. It seems perfectly plausible that union communicators could impart new and innovative processes of engagement as well as important social justice messages if these were things that the union was truly embracing both in practice and in their organizational structure. And despite all the challenges with social media that we have outlined here, it seems difficult to imagine that these would be insurmountable, or

even particularly prohibitive, if unions were presenting a unified and consistent message both in their organizational structure and their communication, a message that reflected a renewed commitment to democratic processes, to more horizontal organizational structures, and more general social appeal.

There are not a lot of solid, verifiable, quantifiable conclusions we can draw from looking at unions' use of social media. One of the conclusions we can make is that while Canada's largest labour organizations represent millions of workers, they have surprisingly few active followers on social media when compared with many corporate bodies. However, given that we have contended that many of the long-term goals of the labour movement are not easily measurable, it is not even clear that this is, in itself, particularly useful information. We know that unions are using social media in a fairly straightforward, informational way, trying to disseminate news and information about issues that might be interesting and useful to their members. It seems that many of the communication officers are not entirely satisfied with the effort and resources that their unions are putting into social media. But it is also not clear that if resources were redirected, anyone would be entirely sure how to effectively use them. This is, perhaps, one of the most troubling elements in the research; social media seems to have no clear formula for success for unions or anyone else, which perhaps partially explains why books continue to emerge concerning the renewal of the labour movement with no more than a passing nod at the issue of the Internet in general and social media in particular. It is clear that union communicators possess a fair degree of frustration with social media and their unions' use or lack of use of it. But without a clear path forward, this frustration remains unfocused and unproductive.

Chapter 4.

Conclusion: The Digital Front

In his 1996 book *The Cultural Front*, an encyclopedic work on the radical rise of social activism in the U.S. during the Depression, Michael Denning (1996) recalled that “when the generation of the Popular Front looked back at the history they had inherited, they often told a story of the decline and fall of the Lincoln republic” (p. 464). This exercise of “looking back” by a radical generation is an important reminder that progressive social renewal often occurs in moments of perceived historical failure. As Fredric Jameson (1991) points out: “the productive use of earlier radicalisms [...] lies not in their triumphant reassemblage as a radical precursor tradition but in their tragic failure to constitute such a tradition in the first place” (p. 209). The idea expressed by Jameson here is not so much that radicalisms have a tendency to fail in toto; after all, the flowering of social utopia can hardly be the standard by which any progressive movement should be judged. Rather, the point is that it is in times of weakness—when a movement seems to have come to a dead end and it has perhaps begun to lose some of its previous gains—that re-evaluation and renewal becomes a driving imperative. The Popular Front was in part a response to difficult times in the wake of a period of relative reform and growth. And the massive expansion in unionism—and progressivism in general—that occurred during the thirties, forties, and fifties could arguably only have occurred in conjunction with a cultural shift in which artists, intellectuals, academics, critics, economists, etc., helped to open up a space for meaningful and legitimate critique and reform of certain socioeconomic relations that had become solidified and had begun to be perceived as inviolable and even *natural*.

Talk of union renewal in Canada in recent years has come at a similarly difficult time, and one in which working people’s wages and influence have stagnated, and even slipped backward (Carrick, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2017a). The working-class efforts that resulted in part in the New Deal in the U.S., and the welfare state in many countries globally, were a success, even if their benefits were relatively weak, extended to few, and perhaps short-lived. However, if Jameson is right, a renewal will not be the result of a reassemblage of past victories, but will only come with a cultural shift in which new possibilities are envisioned and new standards for justice and equity are defined and

fought for. Seismic shifts in economic and social order can, and often do, operate like a killing frost on the ways that people have hitherto organized their efforts at resistance to their perceived exploitation. The British guilds, for example, were often a system of self-help associations of elite trades that largely dissipated with the introduction of less-skilled industrial workers who gradually demanded a new kind of labour protection. Some of these changes can be a direct reaction to physical changes in political structures or systems of employment. The shift, for example, from cottage industry to small-scale capitalist production led to the burgeoning of mass resistance which not only fostered the Luddite revolts, but later led to the modern notion of large trade unions. For North American workers at least, the process of deindustrialization is as monumental a change of socioeconomic organization as the process of industrialization had once been (Dyer-Witheford, 1999; Fantasia, 1988). The shift away from large workplaces has a predictably dampening effect on the very milieu of solidarity that had given rise to large-scale unionization in the first place. And that atomization of the workforce can have a knock-on ideological effect of individualization of both working and life concerns.

In Canada, as in many countries, union membership continues to decline as the labour movement has struggled to respond to the ideological pressures of capitalism as well as to the dramatic increases in small scale and fragmented employment. There seems to be little doubt that this precarious and disenfranchised labour force could use the benefits of collective bargaining (Jaumotte and Buitron, 2015; Ross et al. 2015). However, considering that a large segment of the precariously employed are part of a generation of youth that have grown up with little awareness of unions and their possible benefits, a resurgence of unions requires a significant shift in the popular narrative around social and economic equality. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, unions need to respond to their own failures concerning their structures of power as well as their social, gender, and racial makeup. There seems to be a growing consensus that unions need to re-evaluate their operational frameworks as well as their communicative strategies, because “established models of organizing don’t easily apply” (Ross et al., 2015, p. 168) to the demands of dramatically new kinds of economic relations.

The recent literature concerning Canadian union renewal suggests that structural changes, increased equity, and new models of organizing are the way forward for unions in the new economy. Most of the recent studies suggest that there is a disconnect between an increasingly diverse labour force on the one hand and a mostly older white

male union leadership on the other (Camfield, 2011; Foley and Baker, 2009; Ross et al., 2015). Many academics concerned with Canadian union renewal suggest that by adopting social unionism, a model which forges stronger ties with social justice movements and “organizes communities around a range of issues beyond the workplace as a means of challenging the operation of the market” (Tufts, 2009, p. 980), Canadian unions would better represent the precarious groups at the intersection of many social justice issues (Ross et al., 2015; Shantz, 2009).

Radical shifts in technology have presented both opportunities for such networking, and challenges for unions as the public sphere has, arguably, transformed and new avenues of interaction have opened up and traditional notions of communication (at both an interpersonal and professional level) have been proving inadequate to the demands of social and economic circumstances. Lower union density means that popular perceptions of unions and the work that they do is being conditioned by media representations rather than personal experience (Milner, 2012). However, social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, allow unions to provide a counter-narrative to mainstream media’s negative depiction of their work (ibid.). Thus, while unions may continue to face ideological opposition, they are no longer forced to deal with critiques in a forum shaped and controlled exclusively by their opponents, but can begin to engage directly with the public on social media, and potentially create a narrative in the public sphere (ibid.). Furthermore, unions have the potential to exploit their role as facilitators of networking through these channels in order to expand the engagement of their members (Panagiotopoulos, 2012).

The opportunities offered by social media mean that despite the instrumentalization and systemic censorship that exists on the Internet, social media also offers a potentially “epochal transformation” of the media system which may allow people to build an “infrastructure of resistance from the very local to the very global” (Qiu, 2016, p. 631). This form of resistance, or “globalization from below” (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015), is potentially precisely what unions need to respond to the neoliberal trends of macro-globalization which takes place from above through state apparatuses and multinational bodies. Despite the lip service paid to unions by Prime Minister Trudeau and the IMF, there is little question that “the continuing assault upon the labour movement by capital and the state” remain a constant, while the circumstances surrounding communications and the media has drastically changed, and with this

change has come a potential restructuring of power and resources (Dencik and Wilkin, 2015; Tufekci, 2017).

However, the most effective ways for Canadian unions to use social media is not clear. Canadian unions are still under represented on social media platforms when compared with employers, and the potential reach of the union narrative continues to seem trivial in the mass of social media noise. Meanwhile, the vagaries of social media use are made more complex not only because, as this research found, it continues to be under-resourced, but also because major Canadian unions continue to be burdened by traditional struggles around employers' power at a very basic level, and on a day to day basis. Thus, on the one hand, the unions observed in this study continue to concentrate on their own membership and its immediate concerns, despite the interviewed staff's own admission of the need to untangle the misconception that the interests of the labour movement are narrow and specific to a handful of workers, if they are going to be concerned with gaining wider support and participating in public discourse. On the other hand, in the face of attacks from employers and the government, labour leadership are leery of a communication medium that puts union discourse so openly in the public sphere. While traditional media venues may still contribute to the power that a union is able to build, efforts in these domains are in danger of marginalizing their digital media work, an effort that can promise new, and more dynamic, mobilization through social media engagement. The distribution of time and money within these unions appears to leave social media as a distinct, and secondary, realm of union communications which must fight, so to speak, for precious resources. But the control and centralization of messaging is nearly impossible, and rather counterproductive, in a context in which smartphone devices are so ubiquitous.

Possibly as a result of these tensions, or perhaps simply because the leadership is out of touch with the quickly evolving digital mediums, the communications staff interviewed in this study indicated that there was no clear mandate from their union leadership concerning how communications departments should be utilizing social media or how the work should ideally be delegated. These prominent Canadian unions have either been adding a single position to take care of social media, tacking social media onto existing workloads, taking people whose expertise might be media relations and assigning them to social media relations as though it is the same thing, or altogether outsourcing elements of the work. These approaches demonstrate a lack of clarity

concerning the nature of social media and the kind of engagement it requires. The communications work of forming durable networks online is, itself, an act of capacity building and offers unions “internal gains achieved by acting in networks over time” (Tufekci, 2017). If unions fail to expansively open up the realm of social media, and to give a relatively free hand to their staff and members to use it freely, they are de facto losing a great deal of their future capacity, which will make any effort at renewal substantially more difficult.

That being said, while social media and smart phones have increased the potential of union capacity building, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are not completely unobstructed venues for open communication. These new digital public spheres are privately owned, and the algorithms that shape the pathways of communication are tailored to benefit the advertising that funds them. This means that unions must reshape their efforts to fit a model of “likes” and “favourites,” pay to ‘boost’ their content out of the silos they find themselves in, and leave themselves and their network vulnerable to privacy breaches. And since the wealth of analytical data provided to unions by these platforms nonetheless leave the staff’s key questions around the quality of their network’s engagement unanswered, they find themselves adjusting their efforts towards simply a quantity of engagement.

Thus, as previously observed, while social media has undoubtedly become a crucial element of the public sphere, these are platforms that are manipulated by algorithms operating in the interest of private profit. Furthermore, while at first glance the connectivity offered by social media seems to align with the communication and organizing needs of unions, there is a growing realization that the tendency for unions to centralize in the face of ideological and political onslaughts can potentially impede their capacity to take advantage of its benefits.

Admittedly, the number of substantial and quantifiable conclusions that can be drawn from this study of Canadian labour’s use of social media are very limited. Despite the fact that well over 3 million workers are represented by Canada’s largest labour organizations, a surprisingly small fraction of these follow unions on social media. In isolation, however, this fact may mean little given that many of the labour movement’s long-term goals are not straightforwardly measurable. It seems clear that unions are largely using social media in a directly informational manner, attempting to publicize

news and information concerning issues that might have a direct bearing on their members' working lives. However, it appears that the communications staff are not altogether convinced that their unions' efforts and resources concerning social media are effective. And to make matters worse, it is not immediately evident that a redirection of union resources is imminent or even advisable because it is not clear that anyone would be sure how to orchestrate a more effective social media effort. Social media communications appear to have no straightforward blueprint for success, whether for unions or any other institution whose goals are social. The absence of a formula in this regard goes a long way to explaining why work continues to be published concerning labour movement renewal with little or no mention of the issue of online networking. What emerged from this research is that union communicators are themselves frustrated with the whole field of social media as well as with how their unions are using, or failing to use, it. But in the absence of a clear path forward, these frustrations will probably remain unfocused and will not lead to a foreseeable change.

At a wider level, even if unions are able to affect the cultural changes to respond to the Post-Fordist workforce, solidarity challenges among smaller, more dispersed groups of workers is an entirely different, and more complex, matter. And whether or not new technologies such as social media platforms might fill this gap remains to be seen. The formation of critical social analysis, class consciousness, and significant economic resistance, cannot occur, in Gramsci's words, "by spontaneous evolution, by actions and reactions independent of one's will, as in vegetable and animal life" (in Santucci, 2010, p. 35). Rather, an ideological shift is a result of "organization, discipline of one's own inner self, it is ownership of one's own personality, [it] is the attainment of a superior conscience" (ibid.). In other words, socioeconomic changes require a bond between cultural commitments and political ideas. And though huge numbers of people are committed to social media, the degree to which it can be a field of critical cultural consciousness and therefore a way of mobilizing people to actual economic changes is unclear.

Common experiences of economic struggle and social and economic inequalities were once partly reflections of the shopfloor solidarity as well as the cultural efforts of artists and intellectuals (Denning, 1996). The cultural front was a field of focus for an expanding sense of class consciousness and solidarity (ibid.). However, conditions are significantly different today. Not only has the end of Fordism meant an end to much

largescale worker solidarity, but where workers once had a very limited number of cultural materials to consume, there is now a ubiquitous spectacle of entertainment and information which can act as more of distraction than could have been imagined by the activists of the Cultural Front. The Situationists, for example, made this a central problem of their cultural discourse. Debord (1967) expanded the central notion of fetishism in Marxist theory to a cultural approach that observed that the power of images distorts and obscures consciousness of socioeconomic relations. Debord contended that the spectacle is a fundamental weapon of isolation. “The origin of the spectacle,” he writes, “lies in the world’s loss of unity, and its massive expansion in the modern period demonstrates how total this loss has been.” (29) For the Situationist view of modern technological society, spectacle-driven platforms serve to obscure relations rather than create opportunities for critical socioeconomic awareness (Wark, 2011). The growing strategy of flooding social media sites with misinformation (e.g. Russia’s interference in US politics), or simply conveniently-timed mundane distraction (e.g. the 2012 Mexican election), as a means of manipulating public opinion would seem to support this critique (Channel 4 News, 2018; Melendez, 2018; Robertson et al., 2016). The recent revelations concerning Cambridge Analytica, for example, highlight the potential for groups with access to wealth from both states and private interests to use platforms such as social media (and the internet in general) to gather information generated to influence what should ideally be democratic processes (Channel 4 News, 2018). Because of the dangers presented by such groups, unions have a profound interest in promoting digital media reforms that will ensure more democratic outcomes.

These deep-seated cultural issues represent the backdrop against which any potential union renewal process will have to take place. It must be seen that the difficulties facing unions are not simply a matter of unions developing the right, and most effective, strategies from which will naturally grow a new generation of union believers and activists. Union strategies, though obviously important, must occur in concordance with an ideological shift that carries with it profound cultural changes driven not just by workers, but by artists, intellectuals, and activists in marginalized communities.

The uptake of #idlenomore, #fightfor15, #blacklivesmatter, and #metoo may be signs of just such an ideological shift burgeoning in Canada. Additionally, one of Denning’s (1996) essential arguments is that central to the unionization process of the middle of the twentieth century was the formation of a whole new workforce inside the

culture industries. A similar process is taking place today as we see a new workforce of content moderators, social media managers, designers, and others, taking shape in our own, quickly rising culture industries. While unionization has been declining in many sectors, with the recent wave of unionization among digital media companies (e.g., Vice Canada, HuffPost, Gizmodo), there is good reason to believe that the social and technological competences of this new informational workforce might make significant contributions to a new union movement (Israel, 2017). While these digitally fluent workers may revive an important aspect of horizontalism for established unions, like new social movements, these waves of unionization have their own fragility (e.g. the shutdown of Gothamist after its employees unionized) to which established unions can contribute their institutional strength (Evans, 2017). Trade union movements have always responded to the various ways in which work has been organized, and new forms of organizing should arise as a response to these new digital work processes.

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