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Dinosaurs in Cyberspace?

British Trade Unions and the Internet

■ *Stephen Ward and Wainer Lusoli*

ABSTRACT

■ The diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has led to speculation about the role and health of traditional representative organizations such as trade unions (TUs). The arrival of the Internet has heightened debate about TUs' representative and participatory functions. Some have argued that increasing use of ICTs will further undermine the role of TUs in favour of different forms of participation. Alternatively, there has been interest in the notion of e-unions, where ICTs are harnessed to reinvigorate and modernize union practices. Still further, radicals have argued that ICTs have the potential to decentralize power within hierarchical union structures, enhancing participation. Drawing on content analysis of TUs' websites, a union ICT questionnaire survey and elite interview data, this article examines these scenarios in the context of British unionism. ■

Key Words communication strategy, Internet, modernization, participation, trade unions

Introduction

The growth of Internet and other information communication technologies (ICTs)¹ has led to a new spin on the continuing debates about the role and health of traditional representative organizations such as trade unions (TUs). As membership of mass trade union organizations has

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fallen and their political influence waned, they have often been seen as being in inexorable decline, particularly in terms of their representative function and as a participatory channel for citizens.

The advent of the Internet has seen a variety of contrary claims about ICTs' adoption by TUs. Some have argued that increasing use of ICTs will further undermine the role of traditional representative organizations, including TUs, in favour of more issue-oriented groups, protest networks and/or individualized forms of participation. Alternatively, there has been interest in the notion of e-unions, virtual unions or cyber unions, where ICTs are harnessed to reinvigorate and modernize union practices. Recent initiatives by the Trade Unions Congress (TUC) to develop Internet-based services to attract new, younger members demonstrate that some in the union movement are alert to such possibilities. More radically, it has been argued that the use of ICTs has the potential to decentralize and democratize power within traditional hierarchical union structures, allowing for increased participation by members and more accountability of union leaders.

This article seeks to examine some of these scenarios by examining: first, how British TUs are using the Internet generally; second, more specifically whether unions are promoting participation and mobilization via ICTs; and finally, whether any patterns of usage emerge within the union movement. To do so, the study draws on a content analysis of trade union websites, a union ICTs questionnaire survey, elite interviews and membership survey data.

British trade unions – organizational decline and organizational change

In order to make sense of the potential role of ICTs in union affairs, it is necessary to place their emergence in a wider discussion of union organizational evolution. A consensus has emerged that British TUs have faced a significant period of decline over the past two decades. Four interrelated trends have discernibly affected the role of the unions, and help explain the recent reorientation of their standard operating procedures. The first is legislative change, both under the Conservative governments in the 1980s and more recently, with the introduction of American-style regulation on recognition. The former has contributed to undermine trade union voluntarism, and its rhetoric² has depressed the negotiating efficacy of the unions, curbing strikes and making recruitment more difficult. The latter, although meant to regulate formerly voluntaristic industrial relations, thus implicitly favouring the unions,

has not yet produced measurable effects. Second, the long-term macro-economic outlook, which marks a shift from core industrialism to a service-oriented economy now implies a less cohesive workplace, and a more individualized labour force, oriented towards consumption. Third, changing trends in employment – part-time, temporary and subcontractual work – have all increased due to the changing market of labour and industrial reorganization. These are areas where unions have traditionally found it difficult to recruit. Finally, the changing dynamics of TU–employer relations in the workplace towards human resource management, and direct communications with employees, leave less space for TU mediation and mediators (Metcalf, 1991, 2001; Boxall and Haynes, 1997; Crouch, 2000; Gallie et al., 1996).

The consequences of these changes are clearly evident. Organizational statistics, indicate:

- Declining membership – in terms of overall membership and member density. The most prominent indicator of change is a much reduced membership in traditional union core sectors – manufacturing industry and public service. Official figures report falling membership rates, especially among male and full-time workers, employed in traditional (non-services), manual work and in large firms (Sneade, 2001: 436). While membership has fluctuated around the 8 million plateau for the last six years, the number of TUs has decreased by 40 or so.
- Declining recognition – down 22 percent over the last 18 years, and representativeness, defined as the proportion of workers covered by collective bargaining – down 30 percent in the last 15 years. The trend is especially pronounced in private sector manufacturing and services and, more worryingly for the unions, in newly established businesses.
- Declining industrial action – labour disputes and working days lost – over the last quarter-century. Industrial action has reached its lowest point since the 1960s. UK levels of industrial action are well below the EU average, which is even more striking given the poor record of the UK on the worker protection index.

Thus defined, the situation of TUs in Britain is far from rosy. However, decline seems to have bottomed out in the period 1995–2000 and there have even been signs of a recovery in the last two years, both in terms of recruitment and recognition; although it is too early to assess whether recent improvements are merely temporary blips in a pattern of longer-

term decline. Nevertheless, as some commentators have indicated, union decline is not necessarily inevitable or irreversible (Gallie et al., 1996). The literature reviewed here suggests that in order to manage change and respond to the challenges of the 21st century three complementary strategic dimensions are central to union effectiveness:

- Responding to legislative change, notably the importance of large-scale recognition and external organizing.
- Responding to structural changes in the workforce through improved internal organizing, particularly the recruitment of new categories of workers, e.g. students and those early in their careers, and increased attention to part-time members.
- Responding to the changing political environment: i.e. more functional and productive relations with the Labour Party and the wider general public.

It is commonly argued that TUs have so far fallen short in such areas. British TUs have been only partially successful in penetrating private sector service employment, which is the fastest growing sector in employment terms. This is due to dynamics intrinsic in workplace labour relations and an increasing resistance of management (Wills, 2001: 26–31). Over time, the voice of employees is growing increasingly direct, rather than representative, as industrial relations bypass intermediate institutions and, instead, management and employees communicate directly and often individually with one another (Diamond and Freeman, 2001a). This tendency builds on the finding of Machin (2000) about the difference in union recognition between new and old workplaces. Charlwood (2001: 3–4) aptly notes that ‘continuing unionised workplaces have added-on complementary direct communication while nearly all new workplaces opt for direct methods without recognising unions’. After years of silent and controversial quiescence, relations with the Labour government have grown more problematic as the state of public services – mainly education, health and transport – has moved up the political agenda. Signs of dissatisfaction at how the unions are regarded begun to emerge, commonly referred to in the media as the ‘awkward squad’.³ Finally, the lack of opportunity for unionization, rather than a decreasing demand, has characterized the last few years. Despite the increase in membership in the last two years, much more still needs to be done in terms of recruitment, especially among younger workers, as the demand for unionization exceeds the existing opportunities (Bryson et al., 2002).

This is not to say that TUs do not have a 'strategy'. The organizational response of the unions appears to be articulated in different courses of action, which are meant to reassert the eroded representative voice. On the one hand, is the reversion to militancy, while on the other, are workplace and community organizing, and the adaptation to growing individualism by offering services to members, regarded as customers. These two are not mutually exclusive. The Manufacturing Science Finance (MSF), for instance, promised 'to transform itself from an organisation that had pioneered the conservative "servicing model" to one in the forefront of promoting a radical alternative' (Carter, 2000: 117). Either through militancy or enhanced services, TUs need to appear as a convenient transaction point between the concerned parties. To restore its mediatory role, a third strategy seems to be available to some unions – that of professionalization. The professionalization route emphasizes sophisticated mediation skills – a proficient use of the media and, at all times, an easier, less politicized contact with the employers, along the lines of workplace safety, employee training and mutually beneficial human resources management (HRM). This is especially true of the TUC, which is uniquely suited to coordinate the new mediatory role of the unions.⁴

Trade unions, organizational change and the potential of ICTs

Within this wider context of union organizational and strategic evolution, the emergence of the Internet has heightened debates about the nature of the change and the possible role of new ICTs within and across union structures. In relation to the traditional media, Manning (1998: 39–88, and Ch. 3) has detailed how changes of communication strategy were 'shaped both within and without' unions; the communication strategy of a trade union being integral both to the organizational dynamics of the union itself, the Labour movement and to the surrounding political environment – state, labour market and material relations of production. New ICTs prompt change in both directions, helping shape the change in communication strategy. Three broad scenarios have been developed, which encompass the differing possibilities of the role of new ICTs.

Erosion

From the early 1990s, the growth of ICTs has led to claims of the likely demise of representative organizations such as unions. Grossman (1995),

among others, has argued 'that the big losers . . . [in the Internet era], are the traditional institutions that have served as the main intermediaries between government and its citizens – the political parties, labour unions, civic associations'. This notion of erosion is related more generally to ideas of populist direct forms of democracy stimulated by new communication possibilities brought about by the Internet in particular. Radically, erosion was based on the idea that eventually all representative organizations could wither away, as citizens increasingly engage directly and individually in governing themselves via e-voting, e-referenda and e-discussion forums. This line of thinking was particularly prevalent in some of the early, speculative accounts of the possible role of the Internet in politics and society. Needless to say, the specifics of this kind of direct democracy without intermediary organizations are hazy. While the notion of full-scale erosion seems fanciful and unlikely, it is not difficult to envisage some limited erosion of the traditional functions of representative organizations as a consequence of the increasing prevalence of ICTs. In the specific case of TUs, three areas can be highlighted: first, the growth of e-commerce and the new media sector has already begun to alter the labour market, weakening the traditional areas from which unions have recruited their membership. Second, moreover, some have argued that the growth of the new economy, and increased use of new ICTs, will result in a more individualistic, consumption-oriented culture, and in doing so, undermine the collective organizational strength of unions by allowing workers to negotiate individually with management.⁵ Finally, TUs' traditional hierarchical structure and often conservative culture have led to suggestions that they are less well placed to take advantage of the technology than new social movement organizations or ad hoc protest networks (Bimber, 1998). Thus, the introduction of ICTs does not only place unions at a disadvantage vis-a-vis competing political groups, the reorganization of work around ICTs and its effects on society potentially undermine the traditional 'sword of justice' effect exercised by TUs, i.e. the beneficial effect on wages, safety in the workplace and working conditions. Certainly, there is a widespread perception that unions have been slow to grasp the opportunities of ICTs (Hogan and Grieco, 1999: 2). Even optimistic advocates within the UK union movement have warned of the dangers of the failure to adapt:

. . . the final reason why the e-union will happen is that, if it does not, then unions face e-xtinction. In some countries as diverse as France, the United States, and Hong Kong, trade union membership is already down to 10–15%. Unless we use ICT to modernise and unless we recruit in the new

companies and industries created by these technologies we will have no right to e-xist. (Darlington, 2001)

Modernization

The modernization approach involves TUs harnessing some of the opportunities provided by new communications technology to update their traditional functions, produce efficiency gains and market themselves to potential members and to the general public.⁶ More specifically, new ICTs can be used to modernize union practices in a number of ways:

- In administrative terms, websites have the capacity to be used as information storehouses containing organizational, personnel, policy documents and regular news releases. This can bring efficiency gains through reducing the pressures on union staff time to respond to telephone or postal queries.
- It is not simply administrative gains, but also online service provision which is seen as part of the broader modernization package (Diamond and Freeman, 2001a). Debates about the unions as service providers are not new; in the late 1980s and early 1990s there was considerable discussion of unions providing an Automobile Association (AA) service model for workers. The online service model has a slightly different emphasis. It is not only commercial services, but increasingly also professional assistance and training online that unions are looking to provide. It is designed to deal with a more individualistic culture which faces unions by developing the notion that they are positively concerned to see that members progress individually in their careers, as well as defending collective rights. One trade union leader has called for the vigorous adoption of an online services model that could do away with the need for subscriptions: the union could provide online financial services from which it gains a cut.⁷ The TUC has recently launched in conjunction with the National Union of Students (NUS) a web-based service for graduates with career advice, financial packages and housing guides (TUC, 2001). UNISON and the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT) have both extensively used online training and education packages particularly for trade union reps, which not only develop their individual skills but also provide a useful communication forum for isolated workers.⁸

- New ICTs can also be used for targeting and recruitment of members. For those with access to the technology, it is argued that ICTs lower the costs of joining organizations (Bonchek, 1995). One can volunteer or join a union from the comfort of one's own home at the click of button. Political organizations have also recognized the potential of the Internet to reach particular sectors of the population by sending personalized email messages, using cookies to tailor web pages for the individual. Much emphasis has been placed on the ability of the Net to reach younger voters, the so-called e-generation, who have grown up with the technology but are much less likely to join traditional organizations like trade unions.
- Finally, as the unions themselves would admit, they have an image problem with certain sectors of the population. They have tended to be seen as somewhat old fashioned, male dominated, confrontational and are seen as part of the past by many younger people (TUC, 2001). Use of ICTs could counter some of these negative stereotypes and provide a more positive modern image for the union movement.

Democratization

Some commentators and particularly radical activists have noted the potential of ICTs to move unions further than modernization. From a largely bottom-up perspective, they point towards the potential of ICTs to mobilize union members, foster more extensive national and international campaigning and democratize and decentralize union structures thus eroding Michel's iron law of oligarchy (Diamond and Freeman, 2001a; Greene et al., 2000, 2001; Lee, 1997, 2000; Hogan and Grieco, 1999). Such views are based on the idea that the establishment of websites and internal computer-mediated communication systems (Intranets and online discussion facilities) enhances individual members' abilities to inform the leadership's decisions and hold leaders accountable. The greater volume and speed of information flow offered via computer-mediated communication combined with its interactivity and decentralization into people's homes means members can have more frequent and direct access to union elites to communicate their opinions on policy matters and organizational structure. Such developments could also provide members with more information on what their leaders are doing, and thus promote the accountability and transparency of elite-level decision-making. Furthermore, some have argued that just as ICTs lower

the costs to join organizations, it also enables non-traditional participants to participate. Electronic meetings and discussion may allow inputs from those who find it difficult to attend traditional union meetings and conferences such as those who have childcare responsibilities for instance.

Already, the Banking and Finance Union (UNIFI) has examined the possibility of creating virtual branches with online meetings as a means of revitalizing participation in branches where there are low levels of activity.⁹ It has also been claimed that the Association of University Teachers' (AUT) e-discussion list for fixed-term contract staff has helped draw in members who were previously isolated, and created a presence for a group that arguably had felt ignored within the union. Thus ICTs can erode spatial and time barriers and so allow previously disparate individuals to locate others with similar problems or interests and to network more efficiently and quickly.

It is not simply on an individual basis that ICTs could facilitate organizational change, but the independent adoption of the new media by collective structures such as branches, internal union groups or activist networks allows them to communicate their views to a local, national and even global audience more frequently and effectively than previously (Lee, 1997; Hodkinson, forthcoming). The current lack of central control over the Internet, however, means that union elites would find it difficult to prevent the widespread dissemination of internal union views if they chose to publish them in this manner.¹⁰ Such developments mean that grassroots members, as a collective unit, have the opportunity to voice their own views and possibly dissent from official union positions in a more assertive way. Furthermore, use of the World Wide Web by these groups allows them much greater scope to communicate outwards and downwards, i.e. to link up with one another, recruit supporters/members and build campaign networks much more quickly than in the past. Although, it is worth remembering, as Manning (1998) has described, even prior to the arrival of email and Internet, unions have always been 'leaky' organizations where union elites have struggled to control flows of information and maintain a central communication strategy. ICTs, therefore, may simply enhance this tendency.

Shaping organizational change: the role of technology

Underlying all these scenarios is a broader debate about the role and power of technology. Certainly, early theories of institutional and organizational erosion were developed largely from a technological determinist

viewpoint and even some of the more optimistic visions of organizational change have been technologically driven. Such views were often built around the assumption that the technology itself has in-built properties that impact on organizations and drive the process of change. However, as empirical studies of organizational Internet usage have grown, commentators have increasingly pointed towards the importance of social, political and organizational context as the key to understanding organizational strategy. In short, this social shaping approach argues that institutions and organizations such as TUs are not powerless in the face of technological developments but can harness and shape the technology to fit their own needs and demands.

As social scientists, unsurprisingly, we lean towards the social shaping approach, although we accept that it is the balance between technological opportunities and social context that is important in shaping organizational strategies. Our expectations at the outset of this study were that both the specific historical role of the TUs, and the current position they find themselves in, would shape their use of the technology. Moreover, we expected variations in ICT strategy between individual trade unions based on their sectoral and structural differences. One of the broad tasks of this article, therefore, is to uncover the balance of factors that shape and differentiate union ICT strategy.

Research questions and methodology

Research questions

This article aims to respond to three sets of questions, which emerge from the discussion of change and possible ICT scenarios highlighted in the preceding sections. The first are introductory and descriptive of the nature of TUs' online presence; the second are more specific and hypothesis testing, as to the change of TUs via ICT, while the third are aimed at discovering patterns of TUs' online behaviour, if any exist.

First set

- To what extent do British TUs embrace ICTs?
- What are the main functions of TUs' online presence?
- What are the stated aims of their online presence?

Second set

- What scenario of online change does this presence support best: modernization, democratization or erosion?

- Connected with that, what course of change does this presence support best: servicing, participative or professional unionism?

Third set

- Which TUs are embracing which models of ICT change?
- What are the differences between purported and actual functions fulfilled by TUs' web presence?
- How structural is TU change via ICTs? Are TU online strategies determined by factors such as size and economic sector?

Methods

In order to examine the questions outlined above, four complementary methods were employed:

- An organizational questionnaire survey was sent to 50 TUC-affiliated trade unions in December 2001.¹¹ Twenty-three unions replied giving a respectable response rate of around 46 percent. The survey was initially sent via email and a reminder by post.¹² In the main, the questionnaires were completed by communication directors/officers or in the case of some smaller unions, senior officials such as the general secretary. The survey sought to gather some broad information on the union website strategy and use of ICTs and data on the importance of the Internet, their website functions and audience.
- Content analysis of 46 TUC-affiliated trade union websites was conducted in October/November 2001.¹³ We adapted a coding scheme (Gibson and Ward, 2000b) which concentrated on four particular sets of measures based on potential websites functions: (1) information provision – how far the sites were used as a vehicle for providing different types of information to members and visitors, such as news, organizational information, policy documents and conference information; (2) participation and campaigning – how far the site allowed online recruitment (online joining) and encouraged member participation (e.g. bulletin boards or chat rooms for discussion) and campaigning (e.g. download campaign material, join campaigns); (3) service provision – how far the site was used to promote TU training, commercial and educational services and whether it was possible to pursue training and purchase services online; (4) networking – how far the site promoted other campaigns/activism through

hypertext links to other sites and, internally, to other layers of the organization such as regions, branches or internal groups. Content analysis also provides a counterpoint to the questionnaire material, by comparing unions' claims and strategy with their actual online implementation.

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with officials in eight TUs in spring 2002. These were usually campaigns, communications or IT staff. The interviews followed up in more depth some of the issues explored in the questionnaire and the content analysis, examining particularly union ICT strategy and how far their union actively used ICTs to promote recruitment and participation.
- Member surveys – we reviewed and synthesized results from three surveys of union members to gain a bottom-up perspective on trade union ICT activities. These surveys include the large-scale British Workplace Representation Survey (BWRS) (Diamond and Freeman, 2001b), run by the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) in cooperation with the TUC; an online survey of union workplace representatives, workers and management, run by the ISP Poptel on behalf of the TUC (May 2001); our own evidence, from two surveys of Graphical and Print Media Union (GPMU) membership, the first conducted online, the second by post (May 2002). An invitation email was sent from the GPMU to the member subscribers of two union mailing lists ($N = 724$) and generated a 15 percent response rate. The offline survey was administered as a mail-back questionnaire. It was sent together with the April–May 2002 issue of the union's journal, *Direct*, to a sample of 2000 union members. In this case, the response rate was below 5 percent.

Results: British trade unions online

Questionnaire survey

The set-up dates of websites appear to confirm the general impression of unions as slow adopters of ICTs. The Internet entered the UK public domain around 1994/5, but only around 22 percent (five) of our survey had launched a site by 1996. The bulk of the unions (50 percent) did not set up a website until as late as 1999–2000. This can partly be explained by the fact that our sample includes relatively new unions created from a recent spate of mergers within the movement. Nonethe-

less, unions show a distinctly slower pattern of adoption than UK political parties or leading pressure groups/charities, the majority of whom had launched national sites by 1997 (Gibson and Ward, 2000a; Horwath, 2001). The extension of websites to the subnational, regional and branch level is even patchier and slower. Although three unions lacked a branch structure, half of those replying reported that none of their branches were online. In total, among the 23 unions responding, only 90 branches were reported as being online, 70 of which came from two of the largest unions, UNISON and the newly created PROSPECT. These are extremely small numbers given the thousands of union branches in existence.¹⁴ This could of course be an underestimate, since it appears that union HQs do not routinely monitor branch online activity. Only two unions – the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) – stated that they required branches to gain prior acceptance before moving online.

The functions of union sites tend to follow a fairly standard pattern. First, they are aimed extensively at members, rather than a more general audience. Information to the general public, journalists and feedback from the general public scored considerably lower as key functions of websites (see Table 1). Second, the main functional aims of sites are information provision, recruitment and increasing participation. Information provision to members was seen as the primary goal, as all unions scored this as 3 or 4 – major or most important functions – on the coding scale, with a mean score of 3.57. Fifteen unions gave recruitment a high score of 3 or 4, with an overall mean of 2.83 and the corresponding scores for increasing participation were 17 unions scoring 3 or 4 and a mean score of 2.74. Similarly, promoting feedback from members was also seen as quite important (2.30). Online service provision, while scoring a similar mean level, met with a more mixed response, with just over half the unions seeing it as of key importance but a significant minority, 34 percent, rating it as considerably less important, scoring it only as 0 or 1. Administrative benefits, such as reducing costs and keeping pace with technological developments, were generally seen as only marginally significant. They were not rated as key functions of the websites. Finally, although there has been much interest from political parties, pressure groups and charities in raising online funds in both the UK and US, this was deemed by most unions to be unimportant. Fully 68 percent rated it as not at all important giving it a zero score.

Given the functional priorities of unions, and the emphasis on members, it is interesting to assess the importance of ICTs as a

Table 1 Importance of communication methods with members

<i>Function</i>	<i>Total score</i>	<i>Mean score</i>
Information provision to members	82	3.57
Increasing recruitment	65	2.83
Increasing member participation	63	2.74
Providing online services	54	2.35
Promoting feedback from members	53	2.30
Information provision to the public	43	1.87
Information provision to journalists	42	1.83
Reducing costs	35	1.52
Keeping pace with IT developments	34	1.48
Promoting feedback from the public	26	1.13
Raising funds	10	0.43

N = 23.

Scale 0–4, where 0 = not at all important and 4 = most important.

communication channel with members relative to the traditional media. The respondents rated traditional direct mailing and face-to-face contact (meetings/conferences, etc.) as the most important communication methods with mean scores of 3.3 and 3.1, respectively (maximum score of 4 – see Table 2). However, the web and email were the next most important channel, rating very similarly, having mean scores of 2.4 and 2.35. These easily outscored traditional broadcasting such as television (1.0), radio (1.2) and newspapers (1.7). At one level, this is somewhat surprising given the relatively low audiences for websites (see later) and that currently it is still easier to reach far more members via broadcast methods.¹⁵ However, it may be a reflection of the declining and hostile coverage of union affairs through the broadcast media. One of the main potential benefits of the web and email is that information can be targeted unmediated to members as with traditional direct mail. Hence, organizations do not incur the cost of expensive media campaigns, nor are they reliant on the media to select stories or subject them to editorial distortions.

Two more focused questions on recruitment and participation yield equally interesting results. Unions were asked to estimate how many new members, as a percentage, had been recruited via the website in the last year. Paradoxically, while unions saw recruitment as an important function of the site, the numbers recruited were very small. Four said the figures were not known, 56 percent of our sample reported that less than 1 percent of members had been recruited online, with five unions

Table 2 Importance of website functions

<i>Method</i>	<i>Total score</i>	<i>Mean score</i>
Direct mail	76	3.30
Face to face	69	3.14
WWW	50	2.38
Email	54	2.35
Telephone	48	2.18
Newspaper	38	1.73
Radio	26	1.18
TV	22	1.0

N = 22 except WWW = 21, email and direct mail = 23.

Scale 0–4, where 0 = not at all important and 4 = most important.

reporting no new members. In only one case (Transport Salaried Staff's Association; TSSA) did the website account for more than 10 percent of recruitment total in the past year.

While unions deemed increasing member participation to be an important function of their sites, the questionnaire also asked unions what they provided or planned by way of participative or interactive features. In part, this was to supplement our content analysis (see next section), but also to check on closed areas of sites. The first noticeable feature is that for all the possible features of online interaction and participation (Table 3), future plans outweigh actual availability. In short, much of the interactive or participative potential of websites is still at a planning stage. Closed members' areas and email bulletins are currently the most popular features and from this evidence are likely to become almost universal on union sites. Forums where members can interact, such as discussion lists, bulletin boards and chat rooms, are less common, although again a considerable number of unions report that they are in the process of developing such features.¹⁶ Similarly, Intranet services, while currently only available in the case of seven respondents in our study, are planned for expansion. However, Intranet services seem more likely to benefit union staff than ordinary members. Two-thirds either have, or are planning an Intranet service for staff, as opposed to just over one-third for members. Given the current interest in Internet or ICT voting as a means of increasing electoral turnout, it was unexpected to find that unions appear somewhat sceptical of developing e-voting, or balloting, for either policy/pay issues or union elections. Only two unions, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Nationwide Group Staff Association (NGSU), reported having used e-balloting for

Table 3 Participative and interactive features available or planned for union sites

<i>Feature</i>	<i>In use</i>	<i>Planned</i>	<i>Combined total</i>
Closed member only area of website	43.48% (10)	43.48% (10)	86.96% (20)
Intranet service for union staff	21.74% (5)	43.48% (10)	65.22% (15)
Intranet service for members	8.70% (2)	26.09% (6)	34.79% (8)
Email news bulletins	39.13% (9)	47.83% (11)	86.96% (20)
Email discussion lists	17.39% (4)	34.78% (8)	52.17% (12)
Bulletin boards	34.78% (8)	34.78% (8)	69.56% (16)
Live chat room	8.70% (2)	30.43% (7)	39.13% (9)
Electronic balloting policy/pay	4.35% (1)	30.43% (7)	34.78% (8)
Electronic balloting union elections	4.35% (1)	26.09% (6)	30.43% (7)

N = 23.

Table 4 Audience for union websites

<i>Audience group</i>	<i>Total score</i>	<i>Mean score</i>
Own members	52	2.48
Academics/students	33	1.81
Journalists/media	30	1.50
General public	30	1.43

N = 21 except journalists/media *N* = 20.

Scale 0-4, where 0 = never visit and 4 = most frequent visitors.

either policy or union elections and only around a third of the survey were planning to do so in the future.

Questions about the audience for their websites produced some mixed answers. As expected, members were rated as the most common visitors to the sites: 70 percent (16) of those replying saw members as their largest audience (see Table 4). Only five claimed that other groups were more significant. The low scores recorded on all the audience categories listed suggest relatively low total audiences for many websites.¹⁷ This point was underscored by the response on the estimated percentage of members accessing the sites. Many unions (12) were unable to provide information on the number of members who have accessed the site. Of those that could, the majority (seven) estimated that only 5 percent or less of their members were regular users of their sites (see Table 5). Union websites, it seems, have only a narrow specialist appeal.

Table 5 Estimated percentage of members accessing union sites

<i>Percentage of members</i>	<i>Ever accessed site</i>	<i>Regularly access site</i>
0–5%	3	7
6–10%	1	1
11–20%	4	3
21–30%	0	0
31–40%	0	0
41–50%	2	0
50%+	1	0
Not known	12	12

N = 23.

Finally, the survey asked about the potential problems of Internet usage for unions. A striking feature is again the relatively low scores given to nearly all the categories provided (Table 6). The problem of user initiative was seen as the biggest hurdle. From a top-down perspective, the Internet is limited as a communication channel by the fact that the unions are dependent on visitors *actively* choosing to visit the site, rather than receiving information *passively* or inadvertently from broadcast or direct mail methods of communication.¹⁸ One other area worth highlighting here is that, somewhat unexpectedly, unions did not rate the biased nature of access to the Internet as being a large problem – its mean score was only 1.48. Only two unions, the AEEU and GPMU, saw it as one of the key problems. Given the considerable debate about the digital divide, and the fact that in some unions a high proportion of members do not have access to the Internet, this is rather puzzling. While one might expect the more middle-class and service-based unions, such as teaching and the civil servants, where there are high rates of access among members, to rate the problem as more than minimal, even the more traditional blue-collar unions did not score this highly as a crucial barrier.

Content analysis (see Table 7)

Web presence At the time of the survey, around three-quarters (54) of TUC-affiliated unions were located with a web presence. Of these, eight were excluded from the content analysis survey, since three were primarily members' sites with little or no public content (the Independent Union of Halifax Staff [IUHS], the NGSU and the Prison Officers' Association [POA]); two were unavailable for the period of the survey

Table 6 Problems of WWW

<i>Problem</i>	<i>Total score</i>	<i>Mean score</i>
Requires user initiative	53	2.30
Difficult to determine return on outlay	38	1.65
Impersonal	35	1.52
Biased towards high SES groups	34	1.48
Too much trivial feedback	32	1.39
Costs	32	1.39
Information overload	26	1.13

N = 23.

Scale 0–4, where 0 = not at all important and 4 = most important.

(the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers [RMT] and the Community and District Nursing Association [CDNA]); one was simply a page stating 'site coming soon' (British Orthoptic Society [BOS]); one was in Welsh (Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru [UCAC]) and another was an unofficial national site (the National Union of Journalists [NUJ]).

Those unions without sites (19) are generally small and/or located in the traditional manufacturing industries. Fourteen of the 19 have fewer than 3000 members and seven have fewer than 1000. Eleven are based in declining, often manual or craft unions, e.g. the National Union of Miners (NUM) or the General Union of Loom Overlookers (GULO). Four though are former building society staff associations (the Independent Union for Abbey National Staff [ANSA], the Britannia Staff Union [BSU], the Union of Woolwich Staff [WISA], the Yorkshire Independent Staff Association [YISA]). One possible explanation is that these organizations tend to use closed employer Intranet sites unavailable to the public.

Information provision The mean score for this set of measures is a relatively unimpressive 6.7 (maximum score 14). However, this masks considerable variance. The most common features on union sites are a news/media page (89 percent), policies (68 percent), documents (66 percent) and online copies of union magazines or newsletters (62 percent). The sites are much less instructive on internal organizational information, such as structure or providing details of officials, union conferences and events. Less than half bothered to explain their structure and 45 percent made little mention of who their leading officials or headquarters staff were.

There are significant variations between unions. Some, notably the health professional societies, education unions and UNISON, provided a

Table 7 Content analysis summary scores

<i>Union</i>	<i>Info provision</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Networking</i>		<i>Services</i>
			<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>	
1. AEEU ^a	9	4	50	0	3
2. AEP	5	1	0	0	0
3. ASLEF	6	5	38	0	3
4. AUT	9	9	199	59	3
5. AFA	5	4	51	0	0
6. ATL	9	7	118	0	5
7. BACM	2	2	0	0	0
8. BALPA	7	4	20	0	0
9. BFAWU	5	3	6	0	4
10. BSU	4	3	0	0	1
11. BDA	6	5	120	13+	2
12. BOS	COMING	SOON			
13. BECTU	9	1	300+	64	2
14. CATU	1	2	11	0	2
15. CWU	9	6	0	47	6
16. CDNA	SITE	OFFLINE			
17. CONNECT	8	7	4	0	3
18. CSP	10	5	100+	0	4
19. CWYU	8	5	54	0	0
20. EIS	4	3	3	0	2
21. EMA	8	6	Links unavailable		3
22. EQUITY	6	2	19	0	1
23. FBU	7	3	58	0	2
24. FDA	8	5	120	0	3
25. GMB	12	8	67	3	3
26. NGSU	MAINLY	CLOSED		SITE	
27. RMT	SITE	OFFLINE			
28. GMPU	8	5	150	4	4
29. IPMS	4	4	0	0	3
30. ISTE	3	1	7	0	2
31. HSCA	7	3	15	0	0
32. IUHS	MAINLY	CLOSED		SITE	
33. MSF	10	6	0	13	5
34. MU	6	3	197	6	4
35. NAPO	7	6	6	0	6
36. NATFHE	11	5	102	17	2
37. NASUWT	6	6	29	N/A	4
38. KFAT	3	1	35	0	1
39. NUJ	UNOFFICIAL	NATIONAL	SITE		
40. NUMAST	2	1	0	0	0
41. SC&P	1	3	0	0	1
42. SoR	10	5	17	0	2

Table 7 continued

<i>Union</i>	<i>Info Provision</i>	<i>Participation</i>	<i>Networking</i>		<i>Services</i>
			<i>External</i>	<i>Internal</i>	
43. TSSA	6	3	0	0	2
44. TGWU	5	3	0	0	1
45. PCS	7	3	110	0	2
46. PFA	5	2			3
47. POA	MAINLY	CLOSED		SITE	
48. NUT	8	7	1000+	0	6
49. UCAC	WELSH	LANGUAGE		SITE	
50. UCATT	3	1	17	0	2
51. UNIFI	8	5	20	0	6
52. UNISON	11	10	500+	52	6
53. USDAW	9	6	COMING SOON		4
54. WGU	4	2	108	0	1
Mean Score	6.7	4.3	N/A		2.6
Score Range	0–14	0–13	0–uncensored		0–6

N/A – not applicable

+ indicates an estimate where it was difficult to count the precise number of links if scattered around the site.

^a Please contact the authors direct for a comprehensive list of abbreviations, acronyms and web addresses.

wealth of information for their members. The Society of Radiographers (SoR), the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) and UNISON sites contain a vast array of research and educational resources in databases and libraries. Others aim at a more general audience though. The Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) site seems to be primarily about football ostensibly, rather like a magazine or sports newspaper, whereas union information is tucked away within the site.

While many of the sites provided news/media features, information was not updated regularly¹⁹ – on average every fortnight – although the standard deviation is relatively high. None appeared to be updated daily, but 30 percent were changed every few days.

Participation and interactivity Scores for the participation measures were generally lower, the mean score being 4.3 (maximum score possible 13). This again masks sizeable variations in approach and commitment. Email contact is now virtually universal on sites. Only one union failed to provide an email address, though it is often much more difficult

to contact elected officials directly via email. Nor is there any guarantee of a reply.

Interactive information-gathering tools – such as databases and search engines, or e-news reports – are the most popular measures on the participation index. On the surface, recruitment was also a significant function of the sites, with 82 percent having pages or sections devoted to joining. However, there was not a single site where you could actually join and pay online. Mostly the recruitment pages offered a combination of downloading, printing and posting application forms or emailing for a full membership package to be sent to you. Concerns about online payment security and eroding the traditional branch recruitment activities may be preventing some unions from fully pursuing online membership.

Two-way interactive opportunities, member-to-member and member-to-officials, are much less prominent on the sites. Around 30 percent of unions have guestbooks, bulletin boards or chat facilities, but most of the union officials interviewed reported that these were not always well used with a core of users normally numbering less than 100. One official even described their electronic forum ‘an utter disaster’.²⁰ None of the sites appeared to allow online question and answer facilities with union officials or elected representatives, although the USDAW site promised to do so in the future and the NUT have considered this.

Networking The vast majority (82 percent) of sites provide links to other websites, though these are not often well developed. Some 44 percent of the sites include fewer than 20 links. There is, however, a clear division here between external and internal networking. The sites provided very little by way of links to internal groups (branches, regions or sectional groups) only 10 (22 percent) had any links to internal sites, even fewer (15 percent) provided any links to branches. There are two possible explanations for this relatively low figure: first, that this is an accurate reflection of the low-level internal branch activity online, or second, that national headquarters are not aware of internal activity and do not monitor the situation. Certainly, there seems to be little concerted effort to encourage branches to move online. Only UNISON, the Communication Workers’ Union (CWU) and the AUT had links to over 40 branch sites.²¹

External links are much more prominent on sites, with 31 unions providing these. Eleven union sites actually contained over 100 links and a small number even offered their own portal service (the NUT, and the

Association of Flight Attendants [AFA]). In general, the links provided additional service to members/visitors, as the most popular categories were links to other TUs, research or education links, government bodies (departments and agencies) and the media.

Service provision The online provision of services at one level appears very popular, with 38 (84 percent) sites having some pages dedicated to services/benefits for members. Commercial services in particular, such as legal assistance, insurance, holidays and credit cards were all popular features. Two-thirds of sites offer commercial services. In reality though, few unions are actually providing services online. For the most part, unions simply provided information on the benefits available and provided a telephone number, less often an email address, for more information. Only around 15 percent (seven) had really developed online service provision; these included the NUT, UNIFI, MSE, the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), UNISON and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). The NUT, for example, provided an impressive array of resources for professional development of teachers including job databases and curriculum development areas.

Member surveys: the view from below

Although trade unions provide scanty participation opportunities for their members, is there any actual demand from members? Analysing data from three main sources (BWRS, 2001; online Poptel survey May 2001; and our own GPMU membership surveys of May 2002) suggests that there is only a small audience for union sites and that there is limited demand for 'collective' online services, i.e. online features that link union members horizontally to their colleagues.

The BWRS found only one in five members with Internet access reported visiting their union site. When we consider union membership in general, only one in 10 members have ever visited their union site (Diamond and Freeman, 2001a). According to our GPMU postal survey, a higher number of about one in four members have visited the union site. However, this is a union with a significant part of its membership now working in the new media sector.²² This confirms the impression from the top-down data from the organizational questionnaire, where on average unions estimated reaching around 5 percent of their membership.

Moreover, both our data and data from the BWRS tend to suggest that union members who are online and active are from a wealthier background, and are already more politically engaged, which reflects and exacerbates the existing patterns of inequality of Internet access in the UK. Hence, union sites are more likely to appeal to those already active within the union rather than ordinary, passive members. It is also worth bearing in mind that one reason for low audiences is lack of awareness or visibility of the site. In our survey of GPMU members, lack of 'knowledge' was rated the main reason why members did not visit. Again this points to those with pre-existing knowledge of the union and interest in union affairs as the most likely users of union websites. While there may be a potentially higher audience for these websites, clearly some unions need to do more work publicizing their web presence to members.

With regard to what members seek from union websites, Table 8 shows their responses to the utility of different online services potentially available to workers. The least appealing features tend to be most notably the interactive online discussion forums. This is also confirmed by our GPMU data. We asked about the comfort of using the Internet compared with traditional means of communication for a range of union activities, and the results suggest that members feel less comfortable using ICTs for more interactive, horizontal activities such as meeting other members, joining specific campaigns and discussing issues (see Table 9). What is more interesting is that these views are held across the board. There is little difference between Internet users and non-users, as all report greater levels of comfort using traditional methods of communication. The same result emerges from the Poptel data, where voting and discussion are at the bottom of the table of most desired features of union sites. Unsurprisingly, there is high demand for more campaign material – information material, and information on workers' rights.²³ One small deviation from this trend is the disposition of lay members towards e-voting, that is the possibility of voting for the election of the national executive committee and policy issues via ICTs. While GPMU data highlight the positive disposition of members towards e-voting, the propensity is not shared by union professionals.²⁴

Although the data from the bottom-up perspective are, as yet, relatively limited and further in-depth analysis is necessary, the survey evidence largely points in the same direction. The overall picture indicates a membership which, if it is interested in the Internet at all, mostly sees ICTs as pragmatic tools to keep in touch with their union,

Table 8 Usefulness of different services available to people at work

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Advice about your rights at work	2.13	3.8%
Information and reviews about your employer or another employer that you might consider working for	2.06	3.8%
Advice about pensions and personal finance	1.99	4.7%
Information about salaries for people in your line of work	1.92	3.4%
Discussion forums for people at your workplace or people doing your type of job in another workplace	1.79	3.8%

Notes: Results refer to valid answers of respondents who are union members. Scale 0–3: very, quite, not very and not at all useful.

Source: adapted from Diamond and Freeman (2001a), which is based on BWRPS (2001); Q68 'Some websites provide information and services to people at work. How useful would you personally find each of the following services if provided on a website?'

Table 9 Comfort of using ICT rather than traditional media for different activities.

	<i>Type of respondents</i>					
	<i>Members online (site)</i>		<i>Members online (postal)</i>		<i>Members offline</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Receive newsletter	5.0	1.7	3.4	2.6	0.7	2.0
Meet other members	3.6	2.0	2.8	2.4	1.0	2.2
Join specific campaigns	3.8	2.0	2.5	2.2	0.6	1.5
Discuss issues	3.9	2.1	2.5	2.3	0.5	1.6
Contact the union	4.5	1.8	3.8	2.3	1.3	2.2
Vote to elect officials	4.5	2.0	3.6	2.4	0.8	1.8
Vote on organizational/policy issues	4.5	1.9	3.8	2.2	0.7	1.6
Membership renewal	4.3	2.2	3.7	2.3	0.9	2.1

Notes: Results refer to valid answers of respondents who are union members. Scale 0–6, from much more comfortable to much less comfortable.

Source: GPMU Survey (May 2002). Q13 'How comfortable would you feel using the Internet rather than traditional media for the following activities?' N = 194.

have an occasional voice in official decisions and make the most of its services. Even though there are a few interesting counter-trends, such as

the positive disposition of lay members on e-voting, overall, the data offer little support for the 'democratization' hypothesis.

Discussion and analysis

The extent and function of union websites

The results reported in the previous section show that the extent to which trade unions are embracing ICTs is mixed and patchy. Clearly, the vast majority now feel it is necessary to have a web presence and make use of email. There are a small number who are developing innovative strategies, but for the most part the hype about the potential of the Internet certainly far exceeds the current reality. For example, while unions have acknowledged the possibilities of online recruitment and services, the ability or willingness to pursue these online is minimal. Overall, trade unions have tended to be fairly conservative in their ICT uses. There is a clear consensus that the basic aim of union sites is information provision for members. In effect, the web is being used as another communication channel (rather like their own direct mail magazines), although it allows more regular in-depth and speedier contact with members. One interviewee referred to a three-stage model of web development, where stage 1 was about rooting it within the organization and putting up the flagpole (establishing and advertising a web presence); stage 2 was developing the content and interactivity of the site; and stage 3 personalizing the information available for individual members.²⁵ While some unions are beginning to develop stage 2, the majority have not yet progressed past stage 1.

From our data, particularly from interviews, it is also evident that ICTs are rarely integrated into union organizations as a whole. Initially, ICTs were often the province of information technology officers and were regarded as a technical matter. As ICTs have become more important, control has switched to communications or campaigns sections. However, the public end of union websites is often not connected to areas such as membership or database management. Many unions do not have, or are only beginning to collect, members' email addresses. The internal consistency of databases, where they exist, is often limited. As with other organizations, integration of ICTs maybe a factor of generational change. Currently within unions, many officials will have been brought up in the pre-IT era; as a new, younger generation of more ICT-literate officials emerges, their use is likely to become normalized within the organization.

Models of organizational change

Given this relatively slow development, it is tempting to conclude that the impact of ICTs on union change is likely to be minimal, although it is still rather early to provide definitive answers. There is not much, as yet, which suggests that ICTs will help sustain the resurgence of British TUs. Conversely, whether unions are further eroded by new ICTs seems debatable and to some extent dependent on the activities of other groups and networks in cyberspace. One basic problem that limits ICTs' effectiveness is that of user initiative – website visitors need a pre-existing interest or knowledge to take them to the sites. If non-members, or passive members, lack the motivation, or simply lack knowledge about the union, why will they suddenly join or become active online? The technology alone is unlikely to be a sufficient motivation. For ICTs to be successful, as some unions and the TUC have recognized, they need to be employed in conjunction with wider reforms and communication strategies.

The democratization thesis concentrates on the internal impact of ICTs within trade unions, stressing the decentralizing and participative possibilities of the Internet. There is little sign of ICTs being used extensively for participative or campaigning purposes. As indicated earlier, the scores for participation/campaigning were lower across the board than for information provision. There was little evidence that ICTs are used widely at a subnational level – the numbers of branches online were small and the use of discussion boards where they existed was minimal. Furthermore, there is little to indicate from member surveys that there is a significant demand for extensive online interaction. This is not to say that ICTs will have no impact on internal structures, but rather than democratization per se, one of the main impacts may be to further encourage pre-existing trends towards the individualization of participation and lead to a more direct relationship between individual members and headquarters union staff or elites. Certainly, email alone opens up the ability of members to get in touch more frequently with union officials, as several of our interviewees noted. Similarly, in the future, a number of unions will offer individual members more opportunities to input into policy via electronic methods, aside from the traditional forums of the annual conference or branch meetings. The level that has the most to lose is, therefore, the intermediary, collective structures such as branches or local officials. While previously flows of information were often mediated by activists or branch-level networks, information can now flow directly to members from headquarters. Whether this enhances democracy within

unions is questionable. On the one hand, it is possible to see this as a means of weakening traditional activists and a further strengthening of union elites, since they have greater resources and more access to the technology. However, others would argue that traditional branch meetings dominated by small numbers of activists, perhaps with more extreme attitudes, were not necessarily conducive to participation anyway. As one official commented: 'some might suggest this [the use of ICTs for participative purposes] is undemocratic but what is democratic about face-to-face branch meetings?'²⁶ Alternatively, it may simply be the case that a new generation of activists using ICTs will replace an old generation using paper-based communications and face-to-face contact.

In short, therefore, the Internet/email may help break down some of the internal hierarchies and allow members more channels to input into union affairs but this does not automatically lead to greater participation or levels of internal democracy. It may be modernization but without democratization.

Patterns of activity

Our third set of questions related to patterns of behaviour within the overall trends outlined earlier, i.e. do different types of unions pursue different strategies online or embrace the technology more fully? At a general level, trade union websites tend to be similar in terms of function and design but this is not necessarily technologically driven. Peer pressure is just as important with unions learning and copying from one another. However, from our content analysis, it seems that unions with higher scores in information provision also tend to have higher scores in other areas, suggesting that certain unions are more active all round and those that have a well-defined communications strategy have pursued a more active online strategy. A combination of three factors would seem important in explaining the extent and pattern of union activity online.²⁷

Organizational resources (staff and finances) The larger unions with more full-time staff available in general seemed to be more active online. While some have pointed towards the relatively cheap nature of the web, it is not a cost-free exercise – to run a fresh, efficient and effective site requires dedicated professional staff, which is clearly difficult for small or cash-strapped organizations.

Organizational incentives However, it is not simply a question of resources, organizational incentives (notably, an online target audience and organizational culture) are clearly important in shaping union behaviour. Some of the most active unions are in the educational sector, where a large proportion of the membership has access to and uses the technology on a regular basis. Those with workers in telecommunications or new media clearly have incentives to provide significant online presence. Although for unions such as CWU, there can be contradictory pressures at work. While part of its workforce is based in the high-tech telecommunications field, it also has a large membership in the postal service, some of whom see development of the Internet and email as a threat to their employment.²⁸

Organizational policy entrepreneurs Finally, the influence of individual organizational policy entrepreneurs can also drive activity with unions especially in the early stages where technology is not integrated across the union. As a senior official at the TUC noted, it is hardly surprising that unions employing knowledgeable and engaged communication/ICT officials are those at the forefront of innovation. Individual union officers can be influential in selling or pushing the technology through the organization, often in a climate of scepticism. Several interviewees (all communication officials) referred to the 'struggle to persuade' executive committees and senior officials of the usefulness of the technology. As one official candidly revealed about his union: there is 'no culture of risk taking with technology within HQ . . . [and activists are] reluctant to spend money on innovation'.²⁹ Nevertheless, a successful ICT strategy generally needs to gain acceptance and support at the highest levels and be integrated across the union. That is to say, being on the 'inside track', close to the union senior cadres is one intervening variable in the equation, the other being a full understanding of how new ICTs work and, more importantly, how they can be made to work for the more general union aims.³⁰

Conclusions

British TUs are undergoing a process of change, following a 25-year long trend of decline in membership, recognition and public support. This evolution seems to have reached a plateau, which extends over the last five years. The strategy for union change and survival in the 21st century appears one of modernization, efficient organizing and improved public relations. Over the same period of time, we have witnessed the prevalence

of new ICTs in every sphere of everyday life, including the political. Parties, governments, pressure groups and TUs have harnessed to varying degrees the characteristics of ICTs to strengthen their position in the political arena. Yet ICTs create as many problems as they resolve, especially for TUs. Indeed, ICTs interact with the very long-term structural trends underpinning union decline: the individualization of society, the reorganization of labour and the professionalization of the political process, which advantage more flexible political organizations. Thus ICTs present TUs with the double-edged challenge of modernization and democratization. In absolute terms, the evidence presented here shows that the response of unions to the challenge has so far been inadequate, in terms of organizing (recruiting and catering for members), provision of services and public relations. Union sites reach small, specialized audiences, in particular members; despite this focus, they make poor or little use of the technology to provide enhanced services, in terms of job and union training and members' support. In addition, unions were found to score minimally on the participation index, offering members few opportunities of real engagement, including the baseline possibility of joining online. 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.³¹ Despite many claims about intentions of current and future development, evidence shows that change involves a few key players, and many smaller unions lag behind. Nonetheless, this slowness to adapt is not inevitable or predetermined, as across the spectrum of the union movement the right combination of organizational incentives, resources and the presence of knowledgeable policy entrepreneurs has led to the formulation of an integrated and manifest web strategy. ICTs are employed more effectively where they are considered a resource and a challenge to established practices, and where the changing nature of the potential and actual membership is built into the re-organizing equation, and catered for via ICTs.

Notes

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1. Unless otherwise specified, ICTs is used here to refer to both email and the Internet and Intranet systems.
2. For instance, the Thatcherite slogan depicting unions as 'the enemy within' during the 1984–5 miners' strike.
3. Tension has grown around recent changes at the head of the TUC and increasingly conflictual relations between the Cabinet and public sector TUs. A small group of left-wing union leaders is commonly referred to in the press as the 'awkward squad' (see for instance, www.guardian.co.uk/union/).
4. The role of the TUC has been noted as pivotal in promoting a new organizing paradigm (Carter, 2000; Wills, 2001). Along with the Organizing Academy, the TUC aims at the professionalization of the workforce, at cooperating with TUs and employers on specific areas of expertise, i.e. health and safety in the workplace and lifelong training of employees (interview with TUC communication official, 14 November 2001).
5. For further discussion, see Chris Davis's 'Unions Get Connected' (*The Industry Standard*, 23 November 2000).
6. For an account of the controversial 'modernization' of union communications predating new ICTs, see Manning (1998: 77–87).
7. Rory Murphy, co-general secretary of UNIFI, the leading finance union, reported in 'From Dinosaur To A Dotcom?' (*Computer Weekly*, 24 May 2001).
8. See 'Unions Make Net Gains in Learning and Links' (*Labour Research*, September 2001: 14–16).
9. See 'Unions Make Net Gains in Learning and Links' (*Labour Research*, September 2001: 15).
10. Discussing a traditional media environment, Manning (1998: 146–57) details the danger posed to union communication strategy by the lack of elite control on information, especially in times of crisis.
11. TUC-affiliated unions were selected since they account for the vast majority of union members in the UK. Sites were located using the TUC site, and then cross-checked and matched-up with a Google search and links from trade unions sites such as www.laborstart.org. In total, 54 were located with websites around two-thirds of the overall TUC affiliates. Two were then excluded from the questionnaire survey as the sites were not yet in full operation, one returned the questionnaire as the union had recently merged and one returned 'address unknown' – leaving a total of 50.
12. Interestingly, in the context of this survey, far more unions responded by post than they did by email.
13. Both the content analysis coding frame and the organizational ICT questionnaire are available on the project website, www.ipop.org.uk
14. As many as 1400, in the case of UNISON.
15. Survey evidence at the time of writing (April 2002) suggests around 44 percent of the British population have access to the Internet; a significant

- digital divide also persists, with access much higher among younger, more affluent sectors of society.
16. Nearly a year after the initial survey, a further check on the websites of those unions that indicated they were planning chat rooms and/or bulletin boards indicated little if any change. We could not locate any that added either of these features although two had revamped their sites and appear to have added closed member areas. Clearly, such interactive features remain more an aspiration than a policy priority.
 17. The survey also asked what audience estimates were based on: none had actually surveyed their membership; just over half analysed server statistics; and the rest based their estimate on a mixture of email feedback or general impressions.
 18. However, this was the only problem that had a mean score of more than 2 (2.30) and therefore rated as quite an important problem.
 19. A minority also promised regular updates but failed to deliver. One site suggested 'click here for latest news', which produced a series of press releases and news stories over four months old.
 20. Interview with union communication official, October 2001.
 21. BECTU (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union) had links to over 60 internal websites; mostly these were individual members' homepages.
 22. A general survey of online participation in the UK carried out by the polling organization NOP on our behalf provides further evidence of low audiences. A question asking whether a person had visited a pressure group site (including both charities and trade unions) indicated only 8 percent with access to the Net had done so and less than 4 percent of the total sample survey. Given that charities and other pressure groups have larger audiences than trade union sites, it is quite possible that less than 1 percent of the public have ever visited a site (Gibson et al., 2002).
 23. Poptel, 2001, Q10 and 11.
 24. Poptel, 2001, Q10.
 25. Interview with union communications official, 8 October 2001.
 26. Interview with union communications director, 6 March 2002.
 27. For fuller discussion of organizational capacity and incentives, see Ward (2001).
 28. Interview with official from the CWU, 30 November 2001.
 29. Interview with union communications official, 6 March 2002.
 30. Again, the role of the TUC is pivotal in coordinating unions' efforts and promoting innovative media strategy. The TUC recently organized a one-day conference on the progressive use of new ICTs. The workshop was attended by the IT officers and heads of communication of the main affiliated unions. Details can be found at: www.tuc.org.uk/the_tuc/tuc-3214-f0.cfm
 31. The results of Diamond and Freeman (2001a) point in the same direction.

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