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International Cooperation, Transnational Restructuring and Virtual Networking in Europe

ABSTRACT ■ Social networks represent one possible trade union response to cross-border industrial restructuring. The aim is to bring together independent actors so as to generate interaction, cooperation and coordination of cross-national practices and integration of policies. This article draws on empirical evidence from four sectors. It first examines whether unions make effective use of the Internet when developing networking and coordination activities to respond to transnational change in Europe. Second, it discusses the reasons for cross-sectoral variation in the use of virtual networking. It is argued that the use of the Internet by European unions becomes a matter of strategic choices and politics, and reflects sector-based differences in the way that transparency, coordination, social cohesion and democracy are secured for representation and bargaining purposes among employees and unions across borders.

KEYWORDS: comparative industrial relations ■ Europe ■ labour internationalism ■ trade unions ■ transnational restructuring ■ virtual networking

Introduction

There is a growing literature on trade unions' use of electronic modes of activity for international organizing purposes. This is seen as facilitated by 'virtual proximity' as the key innovative tool in the process of synchronization of political and social movements across diverse nation states (Pliskin et al., 1997). Thereby unions can attenuate the effects of spatial isolation and establish global networking between activists (Hogan and Grieco, 2000), as well as extending solidarity across local, national and global arenas (Greene et al., 2003; Lee, 1997, 2006). On the other hand, it has also been emphasized that new communication technologies help trade unionists to think and to act beyond the institutional boundaries of their power, and offer them opportunities to improve services and

to attract members while enhancing internal democracy (Diamond and Freeman, 2002).

Nevertheless, discussion of 'unions and the Internet' has recently become much more than just a debate on international union political action and mobilization, union survival strategies and union democracy. Issues of union identity, politics and governance have also been addressed (Martínez Lucio, 2003) and closely integrated with the more general discussion of union coordination strategies, union commitment and international solidarity. More specifically, the use of communication technologies influences the ability of labour organizations to mobilize their members and to coordinate activity transnationally in response to changed economic and socio-political circumstances (Blyton et al., 2004). This implies more than a simple debate on forms of labour organizing or campaigning through engaging in electronic communication across boundaries; it involves an emphasis on understanding unions' strategies and politics within a changed multinational context.

This article develops the concept of virtual networking as a mode of voluntary coordination between autonomous actors, who use electronic technologies as the key tool to engage in communication for political and strategic purposes. This may be an obvious point but it is missing from much of the debate on unions and communication technologies. More specifically, the article examines the extent to which participants in trade union networks strategically monitor and condition the outcomes of collaborative and coordinated actions in the context of transnational restructuring.

Lillie and Martínez Lucio (2004) argue that in cases of industrial change, management is better able to coordinate its bargaining agenda transnationally than are trade unions, and often uses its ability to pressure local unions in negotiations through benchmarking across borders, resulting in a deterioration in wages and working condition on an international scale. It is therefore important to grasp the logic of union virtual networking, its scope and coordinative role. When trade unions use the Internet for networking in a context of transnational restructuring, there is an important political dimension involved in monitoring and elaborating the outcomes of the exchange of information among the actors. The functioning, the content and the outcomes of these virtual networks reflect existing differences in trade unions organization and structures, such as the distinctive sector-based aspects of union politics and the strategies they develop to deal with the competitive challenges of transnational capital restructuring.

Hence analysis of trade union use of the Internet in response to cross-border restructuring must take account of two complicating features. The first is the impact of sector-based particularities; the second, distinctive

political developments within the labour movement. More specifically, an emphasis on the structural features of a particular sector must be complemented by a focus on trade union social and political differences. These factors interact to shape the use of communication technologies to develop online network-based initiatives, and thus influence the content and the functions of virtual networking.

A study at European level allows us to examine in detail the political and strategic coordinative dimension of the use of online networking, and the way this is linked to communication strategies in the diverse European industrial sectors. After surveying the current literature on the Internet and the labour movement is presented, this article examines diverse European sectoral experiences in trade union use of the Internet as a political and strategic tool for coordinating across borders in response to transnational change. The focus is on how trade unions in four different European sectors (metalworking, graphical, transport and public services) have used communication systems and how they have tied the dynamics of the Internet to their specific politics and objectives.

Method and Cases

The research reported in this article was undertaken as part of a project led by the ETUC under the title of 'Trade Unions Anticipating and managing Change in Europe' (TRACE). The project brings together European Industry Federations (EIFs) and union confederations from 10 EU countries (ETUC, 2006). The author was responsible for the coordination of the project, which aims to support trade unions in Europe to build up capacity to accompany and manage industrial change through the implementation of virtual networking. Data collection was carried out from January 2005 to April 2006. It consisted of participant observation at trade unions meetings and workshops, together with 20 qualitative semi-structured interviews with local, national and European trade union officials covering the four sectors under examination in this article. Differences reflecting diverse trade union sector-based strategies and politics emerged as the key explanatory variable for the diverse functioning and content of the different virtual networks.

The cross-sector comparison is an attempt to unify threads of research on union virtual networking and international unionism based primarily on single-industry or company-level case studies. The research covers four sectors, metalworking, the graphical industry, transport and public services, and their respective EIFs. All these sectors have specificities regarding their nature, union traditions and union strength. They have also been engaged with the Internet to different extent for exchange of information, coordination and policy-making purposes. In this respect the article has

a strong sector-based comparative European dimension, which offers scope to examine the extent to which sector-based specificities matter when analysing unions engaging with virtual networking.

Transnational Restructuring and Union Virtual Networking

The new era of globalization has set the scene for the emergence of international markets. This reflects the increased importance of multinational companies (MNCs), which provide economic coordination on a world scale by restructuring their activities, transferring resources and production from one country, sector or market to another and promoting mergers and acquisitions in order to expand their size and importance and maximize their profit. Industrial restructuring driven by market pressures forces workers and governments into competition with each other as MNCs take advantage of the diverse national, regional and local social and labour market conditions. As Streeck (1998) argues, the implications for labour are that the power of workers and unions is undermined because of the erosion of the material base of traditional redistributive solidarity in collective bargaining and welfare states. Trade unions, and particularly those from the most economically advantaged countries, regions or localities are fearful of the impact of increased international competition. They worry that capital mobility together with new forms of employment and work organization entails further competition between countries, and workers and trade unions across countries, on the basis of differences in labour standards. While intensifying inter-union competition between countries, the restructuring of production and service activities with the relocation of production and services from higher- to lower-wage countries also stimulates a downwards spiral of labour standards with a wave of concession agreements as national unions struggle to secure jobs. This is because, as Katz and Kochan (2004) argue, local unions seem to be willing to grant concessions which employers demand since they feel under direct pressure from workers threatened by employment losses.

In recent years there has been much discussion about the ability of trade unionists to bypass their traditional national organizations and structures and create networks of workers and of local unions or branches as a means to cross-national cooperation. The aim is to respond solidaristically to the competitive challenges posed by contemporary international restructuring. For example, Waterman has written of the possibility of 'communications internationalism' (1998: 215), while O'Brien (2000) argues that the end of the Cold War and the enhanced ease of communications facilitated by information technology have enabled trade unions to rethink their international organizations and practices.

The objective surrounding such ideas was shared by some former leaders of international union organizations who envisaged the creation of global unions capable of engaging in cross-border collective bargaining with their employer counterparts, such as the MNCs (Levinson, 1972). International collective bargaining and globally operating corporation-based unions, however, have either had only moderate success or are only currently in their infancy, despite efforts over the last three decades. In addition, transnational union interaction has not always proved cooperative (Tuckman and Whittall, 2002). The difficulties in developing solidaristic rather than competitive union practices and networking in a context of multinational change can be explained by what Collier (1986) calls 'coercive comparisons': unions are pressured to undermine each other by concession bargaining on pay and working time, as part of a struggle to maintain national employment levels and production locations.

Although this practice seems to be typical of the manufacturing sector, similar effects are also illustrated in the service sector as the consequence of the programme of liberalization and deregulation of the labour market, in which the European institutions as well as national governments have been strongly engaged in recent years. There can be no doubt that in the service industries, the acceleration of outsourcing (off-shoring) through the development of the logistics of the production chain, the relocation of activities across borders as well as the transformation of public organizations into business institutions, have enlarged the area of competition among unions internationally on wages and working conditions.

Given these changing environmental pressures it is therefore crucial for trade unions to speed up the process of interaction and networking across borders. The challenges posed by the internationalization of the economy and transnational restructuring call for a new logic of trade union organization: a 'network union' that is based not only on traditional forms of bargaining relationships and hierarchies (Martínez Lucio, 2005). The object would be to establish a new form of regulation where workers, activists and trade union officials organize through networks and influence the agenda of capital through innovative strategies and policy-making. For Waterman (2001), these networks can transcend institutional constraints on communication.

In what Castells (1997) calls the 'information age', international communication through information technology can facilitate the cross-national coordination of diverse aspects of trade union activity, both formal and informal, within a context of change (Hodgkinson, 2001). This is because online networks can provide enhanced opportunities for information exchange through flexible communication with like-minded individuals and groups who may be geographically separated. They can offer a platform for discussion and debate, where social dialogue and

mutual learning can be promoted and enhanced and constructive knowledge-sharing encouraged. They can also encourage transnational exchanges and represent a means to increase the numbers of participants. Hence, online networks may support the construction of discourses of transparency and internal democracy within the labour movement, while encouraging the transformation of trade unions from bureaucratic to 'network organizations' (Hyman, 2005). Harrod and O'Brien (2000) argue that the issue is here not of labour organization and levels of activity but the character of the coordination processes as political and regulative ones.

This article stresses the political practices – rather than simply the institutional aspects – through which international labour coordination as a regulative phenomenon within union virtual networks needs to be examined. We illustrate how the sector-based framework and union strategies and politics provide distinct resources and levels that influence the use of communication technologies for the construction of virtual coordinative networks across borders. More specifically, the logic of such coordination and the manner in which it is developed, its level of intensity and form depend on the trade union politics and strategies within each sector. As Martínez Lucio (2005) argues, the role of the political is very important in shaping, developing and crystallizing the use of information technologies to generate virtual networks. Such an argument is valid for the action-based analysis of labour networks and international labour activity: above all, politics serves to justify, legitimate and provide meaning for the functioning of the networks and the relationships among their members

Thus, the extent to which new forms of cross-border coordination for political purposes are developed across sectors among (and within) countries in the face of transnational change propels us to discuss new ways to systematize and explain differences between virtual networks, their functioning, use and possible problems. In particular, we indicate two categories of virtual networks: 'coordinative' and 'informative'; and we examine how each network is structured in terms of distinct dimensions, such as its content and its communication strategies.

The Cases

The European Metalworkers' Federation

Since the beginning of 1990s the metalworking trade unions have directed their energies towards the promotion of cross-border bargaining coordination, with the aim of combating the downward pressure on wages and working conditions that the intensification of regime competition under

Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) was expected to exacerbate. The approach of the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF) has followed a clear political position on what is seen the way to manage the competitive challenges posed by multinational capital: 'EMF aims to ensure a European response via strong trade union cross-border co-operation' (EMF, 2005).

Accordingly, communication technology was used as the tool to create a social network promoting coordination cross-nationally. In November 1999 a European collective bargaining information virtual network was build up, called EUCOB@. The intensification of restructuring operations by MNCs reinforced the resolve of EMF to elaborate a common strategy, and the activities of EUCOB@ have been intensified and enlarged in recent years. In particular, members from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) entered the network as the result of EU enlargement in 2004. Moreover, the activities of coordination of the virtual network have been complemented by the creation of online country-based historical archives containing information on sectoral and company bargaining. At the time the research was undertaken, EUCOB@ consisted of 52 correspondents in 27 European countries (Gollbach, 2006). Correspondents are members of the EMF affiliated unions, and submit regular reports on recently concluded collective agreements and ongoing bargaining activity in their countries.

The exchange of information within EUCOB@ is organized via e-mail and coordinated by a special project manager at the EMF secretariat in Brussels. As indicated, the EUCOB@ information system is a tool to improve and enhance EMF coordination as well as to strengthen national collective bargaining across Europe by a structured and permanent information exchange and consultation process. EUCOB@ has recently re-focused on two central aims. First, it offers EMF affiliates quick and easy scope for up-to-date reports on current bargaining trends in different member states. At the same time, it provides a country-based historical reconstruction of the different trends in collective bargaining. In particular, the EUCOB@ reports provide the data which enable the EMF centrally to monitor the collective bargaining outcomes in European metalworking in the light of its 'coordination rule', adopted in 1998. The aim is to prevent, or at least minimize, concessions on wages and working conditions by national unions and local works councils in response to transnational restructuring. Second, EUCOB@ is intended to process existing data and information in order to produce analysis and overviews of the needs of EMF and the national unions. Hence the information which is exchanged through EUCOB@ is further elaborated centrally in order to produce an information archive where the information exchange is documented and can be used by the members of the network; an annual report; periodical surveys on special matters; and a platform which delivers support for transnational solidarity action. As such, the

virtual network is used as a regulatory tool through which EMF can centrally monitor national and local bargaining activities. The aim is to strengthen cross-border union cooperation and diffuse the political message that 'no negotiations are a national issue alone, but that all have implications beyond national borders' (EMF, cited in Broughton and Schulten, 2001).

Thus coordination of collective bargaining across Europe became the main strategy for unions in the metalworking sector in order to avoid downwards pressure on labour costs. This is emphasized in the EMF *Handbook on Restructuring* (2006) which contains guidelines on how workers' representatives should respond to company plans for transnational restructuring. In the handbook is outlined the need for the trade unions to go beyond the national level and develop joint strategies of coordination for bargaining at European level. This is done with the support of EUCOB@, which as part of its activities recently established company-based virtual networking for Delphi, General Motors and Electrolux, in order to coordinate local negotiations across borders in case of transnational restructuring.

UNI-Europa Graphical

Uni-Europa is the European regional organization of Union Network International (UNI), covering employees in a wide range of private-sector services, including commerce, finance, telecommunications, media and printing. Uni-Europa Graphical covers the latter sector. In 2000 UNI-Europa adopted a policy paper *The Euro and UNI-Europa Collective Bargaining Strategy*, according to which every sector-based division should determine its own structures and objectives for a European coordination of bargaining in order to reflect the specific needs of their sector (Mermet, 2001). Both the graphical and finance divisions commenced initiatives in this field. In particular, UNI-Europa Graphical followed the EMF coordination approach, adopting coordination guidelines in accordance to which pay increases plus newly agreed qualitative elements with quantifiable costs should at least equal inflation plus productivity growth. Unlike in EMF, however, the coordination process was not regulated virtually through setting up an online network, and there was no clear statement from the unions in the graphical sector supporting a cross-national cooperative and coordinative approach as a response to a broader European strategy. Annual online surveys of national bargaining trends were instead used to cluster all the most relevant information on national and local bargaining in the sector. The main outcomes of the annual survey are simply the online circulation of information in order to benchmark rather than to coordinate union responses across borders. The results of

the annual survey are presented at an annual European collective bargaining conference, prepared by a collective bargaining committee, which also aims for a more ongoing exchange of information.

Only in 2005 did UNI-Europa Graphical attempt to set up a gravure virtual network [<http://www.union-network.org/unieuropagraphic/alggravurevc.nsf/index?openpage>] to gather and share information concerning pay and working conditions across the different member states. The network is open to national union affiliates in the gravure sector, and contributors are directly nominated by their national organizations. Members are usually local union representatives at the company level and trade union officials. The virtual network works in parallel to the annual survey on collective bargaining and it offers scope to the members to share a view on the contractual situation concerning pay and working conditions in the countries covered in the network. Accordingly, every network contributor has the ability to put documents on the database of the UNI-Graphical website, has access to all messages and is able to contribute to the work of the network. However, information technology is primarily applied to exchange information, which can be used by local and national unions. It is a rather weak attempt to use the virtual network to build up coalition of interests between different groups of workers while strengthening cross-border graphical trade union cooperation in Europe. This weakness can be explained through diverse factors which characterize the graphical sector: the sectional and parochial interests of the national trade unions, the lack of a legal framework able to support pan-European trade union activity and the acute lack of resources available to the unions. The policy division between the diverse national-based trade unions in the sector is also a crucial element, which as Gennard and Newsome (2005) illustrate, can negatively affect the extent to which social coalitions between the diverse workers across different national contexts can be created, given the lack of the institutional tools able to promote and support such coalitions.

European Federation of Public Service Unions

In 2000 the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) adopted a declaration of principles regarding collective bargaining in public services. The main idea was to introduce bargaining coordination rules, emphasizing that pay increases should be related to average national productivity growth in order to guarantee a parallel development of wages in both private and public sectors. In 2000 and 2002 EPSU held two collective bargaining conferences for the whole public sector including local and regional government, public utilities and health and social services, in order to develop initiatives for the coordination of information on collective bargaining. The aim was to build capacity for a coherent

collective bargaining strategy in the public sector. As a result, EPSU decided to follow the EMF experience and in 2002 an online network called EUCOB@ was created for the coordination and rapid transnational exchange of brief country-based information on wage demands, the content of agreements and important national social and economic developments such as government proposals.

However, problems occurred when the EUCOB@ network was initially launched. There were only few contact persons within each affiliate who could take responsibility for feeding information back to the members of the network on the collective bargaining situation in their countries. The result was therefore a limited and uncoordinated exchange of collective bargaining information between affiliates, and between affiliates and EPSU. There was also a lack of prompt updates on current or concluded collective bargaining, as well as a lack of macroeconomic data and qualitative information on working time, vocational training and lifelong learning in each country. As a result, information tended to remain unanalysed and unutilized because of the lack centrally of dedicated resources able to manage and to coordinate the information exchange.

Aware of these problems, in 2005 EPSU launched a second initiative. An online server was set up [<http://trace.epsu.org>]. The virtual network follows the new developments in industrial restructuring in the public sector, in particular those related to privatization and marketization of public services as the result of the liberalization of services and the free movement of workers within the European economy on one hand, and the decentralization of services on the other. Marketization is the process by which market forces are imposed in public services, which have traditionally been planned, delivered and financed by local and central government. Decentralization of public services is defined as the gradual process of transferring power and resources from central government to the lower levels (a phenomenon called also 'devolution'), such as regions, provinces, districts and municipalities. Evidence in Europe illustrates that the devolution of responsibilities and resources from central to local levels has important social implications. In Britain, for example, Sisson and Arrowsmith (1999) report that over the past 20 years the trend of decentralization propelled by both Conservative and Labour governments has contributed to increased differences in pay systems and outcomes for civil servants employed directly or indirectly by central government.

The newly-established EPSU virtual network has currently more than 25 country participants (including CEE countries) and it has a clear political objective. Its aim is to challenge the ambiguous EU perspective on public services. Although the European Commission recognizes that public service missions take precedence over competition policy, in practice it promotes the marketization of public services through sectoral liberalization directives (such as the original text of the Bolkenstein Directive).

It also encourages public–private partnerships as a form of privatization mechanism, and supports decentralization as the devolution of competences to the local level with the corresponding downward pressure on working conditions. This is why EPSU wants to involve the different unions in the different member states to network and cooperate transnationally online in order to lobby for the elaboration of a positive legal framework for the development of quality public services throughout Europe.

In contrast to other sectors, this is particularly crucial in the public service sector because of the absence within the European Commission of any interlocutor who can dialogue directly with the representative of the European federation in the public sector on restructuring. Hence EPSU had to search for alternative modes to influence the decision-making process at European level. The European trade union strategy was to create a cross-national virtual network and to use it to lobby the European institutions for the improvement and the guarantee of better employment conditions in the public sector. Hence the online sever is used as a tool to share ideas and information in the most rapid and accessible way with the different unions across borders, to exchange relevant documents and reports, to collect and share proposals concerning quality of public services. The aim is to elaborate a proposal for a new European legal framework covering employment and quality in the public sector, to be discussed within the social dialogue with the social partners at European level.

European Transport Workers' Federation

The transport sector has experienced rapid changes in recent decades. In particular, competitive advantage sought primarily through cost reduction and enhanced services has resulted in the redistribution of production activities of MNCs through the relocation of manufacturing operations to locations with lower labour costs. It has also generated the creation of networks with suppliers and producers through outsourcing arrangements on a global scale, the architecture of which can be thought of as the value chain (Sturgeon, 2001). Logistics service providers (Deutsche Post-DHL, TNT, UPS, Fedex) play a vital role in the movement of goods along the global value chain. The interaction between logistics service providers and suppliers as well as between producers and lead organizations in transnational production networks raises important issues for employment and skill requirements. It also poses the problem of the increasing necessity for re-regulation of the industry at a global level. It can be also argued that the relocation of major logistics providers to CEE countries following EU enlargement has speeded the process to hire employment under the working conditions of the country of origin.

For example, CEE drivers who transport goods and materials across European countries are often employed under the working conditions of their own country of origin. This phenomenon is called *cabotage* (literally, coastal navigation), which allows a logistic service provider in a particular country to transport goods across Europe at the wage levels of their own country of origin.

By enlarging the scope for deterioration of working conditions, the practice of *cabotage* has contributed to increased competition between logistics service providers, which look for the cheapest solution in terms of labour costs. Outsourcing in the transport sector has led to a major differentiation of employment conditions. More specifically, unless protective measures are specified for the workers of the service or subcontracting company, the outsourced employees are usually under separate (often lower) working conditions, including collective representation rights, than the ones covering the co-workers in the contracting company. It is beyond the scope of bargaining and influence of the workers' representatives in the service or subcontracted company to regulate the working conditions of those who work in the contract company. The outcome is the highly segmented nature of the sector in different sub-sectors, with a corresponding high level of inter-sectoral competition, which potentially leads to 'social dumping'.

Hence it appeared crucial for the European trade union movement in the transport sector to reintegrate or recompose such fragmentation through reinforcing communication and creating solidarity between the different workers operating across diverse companies in the value chain. This is relevant for two reasons. First, it offers to unions the possibility of better control of the level of wages and working conditions between (and within) companies. This is considered crucial especially in those cases where national legislation does not offer social protective measures for workers who are transferred to a subcontracting company. In brief, the idea is to facilitate the regular exchange of experiences and practices concerning national and sectoral agreements, provisions and trade union strategies, as a way to further promote cross-national coordination.

Second, although logistics jobs are often associated with low wages and poor working conditions, workers in the logistic service providers actually play a key role in the whole value chain, making companies vulnerable to industrial action. Hence it is important for the European labour movement to organize the workers along the value chain by trying to recompose the division produced by the management of the value chain. The European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF) and its affiliates therefore considered the Internet the most important tool to create unity amongst the unions and the workers of the value chain and organize them while promoting online communication. Information technology offers quick and high-performance communication, and

thereby leads to a better control of the flow of information through the World Wide Web. More specifically, the Internet is seen as a communication platform connecting national and European initiatives in order to organize days of action and promoting solidarity between (and within) different companies. This is confirmed by Eduardo Chagas (ETF General Secretary), who (at a seminar jointly organized with the Swedish transport union SEKO in February 2006) praised the ETF's recent initiative (undertaken under TRACE) to create a European virtual network in logistics which can help in reconstructing unity as against the segmentation of the value chain.

Different Networks, Different Politics in the European Union Movement

A comparative analysis of the four cases presented in this article illustrates the existence of inter-sectoral differences concerning use of networks and communication technology in response to industrial change and employment-related issues at corporate level. More specifically, as the four case studies show, different sector-based union politics and strategies reflect diversity in the content and the functioning of virtual networks and hence in the use of communication strategies.

The virtual networks which were established in the four sectors in order to deal with the economic and social consequences of cross-border restructuring are involved in a dual process of constitution. More specifically, the practices of these networks, including the use of information technology, are generally directed towards the communication and exchange of information among their members. However, the research findings illustrate that the dynamics of managing and directing communication in the virtual networks – and indeed their actual functions – are different across the networks. This difference usually indicates a specific sector-based use of information technologies by the networkers and therefore reflects different trade union politics.

We offer a conceptual framework for understanding this diversity. We begin with the ways the four virtual networks view themselves, as evident from their objectives and functions as the expression of their content and form, and how they use communication technology. We identify two principal categories of virtual networks: 'coordinative' and 'informational'. The former use information technology for 'regulatory', 'organizing' or 'lobbying' purposes. They usually operate to exchange and coordinate information – particularly on collective bargaining issues, employment and working conditions – to build up capacity for a coherent union strategy at European level. They also use this exchange of information as a tool to coordinate action and to establish solidarity between workers among (and within) different companies. Conversely, the

‘informational’ networks have a more limited function. This means that information is exchanged between the networkers to benchmark rather than to coordinate labour strategies internationally. We argue that this diversity reflects different trade union resources and politics, and is therefore the expression of union ideology. Figure 1 indicates the different functions of the ‘coordinative’ and ‘informational’ virtual networks with reference to the four case studies we have analysed.

FIGURE 1. Types of Virtual Network

‘Coordinative’ virtual networks		
<i>Regulation</i> (Metal working)	<i>Organizing</i> (Transport)	<i>Lobbying</i> (Public sector)
‘Informational’ virtual networks		
<i>Information</i> (Graphical industry)		

In its use of ‘coordinative’ virtual networks as a response to cross-border restructuring, the aims and objectives of EMF extend beyond those of the ‘informational’ virtual networks, whose primary focus is purely on exchanging information. Rather, the use of communication technology in its virtual network of affiliates aims at defining and implementing strategies and policies with a clear regulatory character. These strategies and policies are based on the systematic development of EMF’s internal capacity to coordinate among the different country-based trade unions organizations and structures. In this respect, coordinative virtual networks define sets of tasks to be implemented. This involves consolidating the autonomy of the network to deliver capacity, so that affiliates can engage successfully in negotiation with management in order to regulate the employment and working conditions effects of cross-border restructuring. The most noteworthy feature is a strategic and systematic approach of the virtual network, expressed in its coordinative activities for regulating employment across borders while underpinning solidarity between workers. For example, in 2000–01 and in 2004 GM management announced plans for a major restructuring of European car production, involving a drastic reduction of employment and setting production locations in competition with each other. The metal-working trade unions used communication technology as a strategic tool for cross-border worker mobilization and union coordination between the GM plants affected by the management challenge, in order to prevent disunity and division. The result was the negotiation of a European framework agreement between GM management and the various local unions, which reduced the disruptive social effects of cross-border restructuring.

Where the development of greater scope to regulate employment issues cross-nationally via coordination is weakened, either by internal obstacles such as a lack of influence in European-level sectoral bargaining (the case with EPSU), or the segmented nature of the sector (as with ETF), a coordinative virtual network with regulatory aims will shift to other terrains. This means moving from 'regulatory' to 'lobbying' and 'organizing' fields, strengthening internal capacity and opening up the range of activities of the coordinative virtual networks, which is usually reflected in their content and the use of communication technology. Here communication and exchange of information is still necessary for coordinative purposes, but the aim is different. This is because of differences in the challenges to international labour resulting from transnational restructuring in each specific industry, the diverse ways each sector is structured and the resources available to the unions.

Despite these differences, the 'coordinative' virtual networks overall create transnational structures of interaction and produce results which have a 'European value-added', which is primarily experienced at enterprise level nationally. As such the 'coordinative' virtual networks not only communicate information amongst the networkers but also provide support to store historical data, to elaborate reports which are diffused through the Internet and to generate online surveys for policy-making purposes. In other words there is an apparatus of materials which is produced besides the mere communication tool. Conversely, 'informational' virtual networks – as in the case of UNI-Graphical – lack effective transnational structures, and the use of information technology is therefore limited. 'Informational' virtual networks merely see themselves as a forum for the mutual exchange of information and provision of support between workers across borders. They have a particularly important role to play as an information hub with access to communication channels, forwarding and exchanging information between meetings. Members of the network are active providers of information as well as recipients.

The categories of 'coordinative' and 'informational' virtual networks are rooted in both the origins and the evolution of virtual networking more generally, as well as in the analysis of the interests of the associated members, the nature of the industry and the correspondent challenges arising from industrial change, and the constraints which come from the structure of trade union organization. Moreover, these categories may also represent different stages in the development of virtual networks, which may evolve from 'informational' to 'coordinative' character. However, we argue that this progression is not inevitable. An 'informational' virtual network may not develop beyond this stage, and indeed a 'coordinative' networks may regress. Breaks in development are commonplace, especially given the instability of virtual structures. Nor does every virtual network have to pass through each stage; for example, a virtual network

can become 'coordinative' without first being 'informational'. This is because for some virtual networks, being coordinative can be an entirely appropriate strategy to exercise influence over a management proposal, whereas for others accepting and exercising influence may be a second stage in developing a capacity to implement responses.

Conclusions

The tendency to study labour cooperation and solidarity, in other words labour internationalism, in terms of international labour politics implies the need to investigate networking and new forms of transnational labour coordination through the use of information technology. In this article we have attempted to do so by investigating the responses by labour to the processes of transnational industrial restructuring. This analysis needs to be developed with reference to structural as well as social and political constraints, such as sector-based differences in trade union attitudes and politics and their influences on the development of such networks. The manner in which networks are shaped transnationally, acquiring distinct functions, and the use of communication technologies for different objectives, appear to be shaped by the politics of trade unions and their activities internationally. The sectoral dimension is important for understanding the distinctive character of each network. This is relevant for any discussion of how labour cooperation and coordination can be promoted through the forms and discourses of new virtual networks.

In this article we have distinguished two categories of virtual networks, related to their functions and their use of communication technology, drawing on evidence from trade union activity within four different sectors. The primary function of 'coordinative' virtual networks is to develop and refine the exchange and the coordination of information in the light of sector-based trade unions strategies. The latter include establishing cross-border employment regulation initiatives, reducing differentials between workers through implementing organizing strategies and, finally, lobbying in order to exercise pressure on European institutions for the defence of the quality of work and working conditions. As such, coordinative virtual networks use information technology as a tool not only to exchange information but also to use the information exchanged for political purposes. This implies an extensive use of the Internet as an efficient tool to elaborate reports online and policy papers for the development and the dissemination of common rules and principles for cross-border cooperation, such as collective bargaining coordination rules, and cross-national initiatives which are aimed at organizing and lobbying activities. In this manner, the Internet is used as an active and strategic tool for the monitoring of national and local union activities.

Conversely, ‘informational’ virtual networks have a purely communicative purpose: the network itself functions as a passive instrument. There is no aim to align the knowledge acquired through the virtual network to the interests of the networkers in order to enable strategic joint action to take place.

Hence the use of communication technology needs to be understood within the appreciation of differences in trade union strategies and politics. Differences in union politics can shape the manner in which new forms of communication are constructed. For example, whilst EMF has a stronger policy-orientation approach, which aims at coordinating employment issues transnationally with the support of virtual structures and resources for bargaining coordination, UNI-Graphical lacks an active approach towards European coordination. Its network has a service orientation: UNI-Graphical prefers to use virtual networks simply as a tool to provide a range of formal information which is then exchanged among its members. This follows the political conviction in the graphical sector that regulation of employment issues is only a national and local prerogative. ETF and EPSU are not as advanced as EMF in establishing cross-national regulation: their virtual networks are developed along opportunistic lines, which is the manifest expression of their own politics. For example, in ETF virtual networks are considered by national union affiliates a potential mechanism for union organizing, and therefore a way to improve working conditions along the value chain. In EPSU, they are viewed as a lobbying instrument to resist pressures by the European institutions for marketization and privatization within the member states.

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