Enhancing transnational labour solidarity

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Enhancing Transnational Labour Solidarity: The Unfulfilled Promise of the Internet and Social Media

Abstract: This article examines the activities of Union Solidarity International (USI), a new UK-based organisation in the international union arena. USI seeks to encourage and support international solidarity between trade unions and other worker movements around the world by harnessing the dynamism of the Internet and social media. Drawing on a combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, Google Analytics and social media data, the findings of this case study suggest that USI is successfully developing an international audience in the United States, the UK and Ireland. However, USI's ability to reach beyond English-speaking countries and mobilise people to engage in collective action appears limited. The article makes an important contribution to the growing literature on social media in industrial relations through analysing the extent to which digital technologies can contribute to effective transnational labour solidarity.

1) Introduction

The use of the Internet has become widespread; almost half of the world's population now have access to an internet connection at home, via computer or mobile device (Internet Live Stats, 2016). This amounts to almost three and a half billion people. The adoption of the smart-phone means that people can now be reached almost anywhere and at any time of the day or night and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have also become integral parts of many people's communicative environment and everyday lives. These developments present the international trade union movement with enormous potential for enhancing transnational labour solidarity. For social movements, more broadly, the potential power of the Internet and social media for communicating and organising was vividly illustrated by the unexpected emergence of two new transnational movements in the aftermath of the North-Atlantic financial crisis: The Arab Spring and the Occupy movement (see Castells, 2012; Mason, 2012). In the UK, they took the form of Occupy London (Taylor et al, 2011; Chomsky, 2012) and UK Uncut (UK Uncut 2016). Despite few financial resources and little institutional support, they garnered hundreds of thousands of followers on Twitter and Facebook, engaging in direct action targeting the City of London and tax avoidance by multi-national corporations.

Inspired by these developments, the UK's largest trade union Unite spearheaded the founding of Union Solidarity International (USI) in 2010. After two years of planning, USI was launched in May 2012. USI's mission is to encourage and support transnational labour solidarity by harnessing the dynamism of the Internet and social media. This involves two key strands of activity: disseminating news to the public which highlights the role of trade

unions in defending and securing the rights of workers around the world; and generating grassroots international organisation for union solidarity using social media. As a new actor in the international union arena, USI presents a unique opportunity to explore the specific advantages and limitations of using digital technologies to enhance transnational labour solidarity outside of the constraints of traditional union organisations. Despite this, USI has only been subject to preliminary examination (Geelan, 2013). Thus, this paper makes two contributions to extant literature in being the first to provide an in-depth case study of one of the newest actors in transnational labour issues, and in doing so, complements the growing body of literature on social media usage in industrial relations research.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section reviews the existing literature on the evolving relationship between trade unions and the Internet from the Web 1.0 era to the Web 2.0 era. The case study of USI is then introduced by way of a background before our mixed method approach of semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis of Twitter content and Google Analytics is outlined. Our analysis then examines the communication strategy of USI and who their audience comprises on their Website and Twitter account. The final section brings the paper to a close by way of a discussion and conclusion.

2) Transnational Labour Solidarity: From Web 1.0 to Web 2.0

The relationship between trade unions and the Internet began in the early 1980s during the Web 1.0 era. This era epitomises what Castells (2009: 55) termed mass self-communication, which is multi-directional, potentially able to reach a global audience (using email, discussion boards and instant messengers), and is 'characterized by the capacity of sending messages from many to many, in real time or chosen time, and with the possibility of using point-to-point communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting, depending on the purpose and characteristics of the intended communication practice'. The Internet quickly became central to the debate on union revitalization (Bergman, 2016) because it could help service members, aid union organizing, promote union democracy and enhance transnational solidarity campaigns (e.g. Diamond and Freeman, 2002; Wills, 2002; Greene et al., 2003).

On an international level, the ability to communicate at little cost compared to print media was adopted by the formal institutions of labour transnationalism embodied in global unions, helping them to improve their capacity for communication and drive their expansion.[1] For example, by enabling them to organise transnational solidarity conflicts and to alert unions of impending attacks by employers. By the 1990s, the Internet also allowed for a proliferation of informal activist-driven organisations which focused on providing information about workers struggles around the world (Bergman, 2016: 99; Lee, 1996). These online manifestations of

transnational labour solidarity took the form of websites that functioned as news aggregation sites, helping to facilitate the exchange of information and straightforward interaction between organisations and individuals.

However, within the extant literature, there is disagreement concerning the extent to which the Internet could enable union renewal (see Upchurch and Grassman, 2016; Hodder and Houghton, 2015: 174). On the one hand, several authors (see Lee, 1996; Diamond and Freeman, 2002; Carter et al, 2003) were optimistic regarding the potential for technological developments to contribute to renewal through a transformation of union democracy, centred around the concept of 'distributed discourse' (see also Clegg, 2002; Hogan et al., 2010). This approach suggested that the Internet would alter understandings of union democracy through the provision of a more 'distributed control over means of communication' (Greene et al., 2003: 285). On the other hand, were those who offered a more pessimistic and nuanced perspective that incorporated issues of union culture and identity, noting how the Internet 'can be used by pre-existing technological and organisational elites both within and beyond leadership structures to close down or restrict discussions' (Martinez Lucio et al., 2009: 117; see also Martinez Lucio, 2003). While the potential for distributed discourse is not disputed and 'unions have advanced greatly in their ability to engage with the Internet and created centrally controlled spaces for intra- and extra-union communications' (Fitzgerald et al, 2012: 95), it is this central control over official pages that continues to allow unions to use 'technology to stifle debate' (Hodder and Houghton, 2015: 186).

Essentially, though, the debate has been surpassed by the emergence of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s, in which the functions of Web 1.0 evolved from a static informational portal to one marked by the explosion of user-generated and interactive content. This began to change the way news is produced, distributed and interpreted. Using blogs, media sharing sites, and social media platforms – collectively described as Web 2.0 – ordinary people can share, like, recommend and comment on content in a way which was far more participatory and active (see Margetts et al, 2016: 39-48). By curating the content that they share and engage with in deliberate ways, users can also re-frame its meaning and significance and create 'personalized action frames' (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). In this way, Web 2.0's ability to encourage user-generated content for redistribution has amplified the ability of union activists to be freed from the institutional constraints more typical of Web 1.0 (Bergman, 2016: 103). Although, as with Web 1.0, the way in which unions use social media will be determined by their practices, organisational structures, and strategies (Schradie 2015).

Two of the main social media platforms are Twitter (founded in 2006) and Facebook (founded in 2004), which help drive traffic to websites as people recommend stories and click on links shared by their friends and people they follow. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the continued importance of traditional platforms (television, news media websites, and newspapers) as sources of news, social media has become an important way of finding and engaging with news for a sizeable proportion of online users (about a quarter on average) Herminda et al. (2012). Thus, there is a substantial opportunity for organisations to reach a large number of people by publishing news content on these and other platforms. That said, Herminda et al. (2012) remind us that there are clear differences between nations and within them in terms of who uses social media (e.g. demographic and occupational characteristics of users) (see also Nielsen and Schrøder, 2014). Therefore certain groups of people are overrepresented (young students) and underrepresented (old manual workers), which will vary according to the country in question (see Geelan 2015).

Fuchs (2014: 186) has suggested that 'social media can, given a good organization, high interest and a lot of resources, serve as protest-co-ordination and organization tools'. Specifically, in relation to trade unions, a more developed understanding of this is provided by Heckscher and McCarthy (2014). They argue that the exponential increase in membership of social media platforms – Facebook, for example, has a billion users[2] (Internet Live Stats 2016) – has also given rise to a new form of solidarity which trade unions and new actors such as USI can mobilize. Their argument is that while strong-tie social networks of *craft solidarity (*based on strong and self-sustaining occupational communities) and *industrial solidarity* (which depends on the more contingent relations of the factory) have declined over the past thirty years, weak tie-social social networks are increasing due to the Internet. This has created the conditions for a new collaborative form of solidarity that builds on the dramatic expansion of fluid 'friending' relations enabled by social media (Hecksher and McCarthy, 2014).

To demonstrate how these new solidarities can be mobilized into effective collective action on a global scale, the authors review the cases of the Occupy movement, SOPA (the Stop Online Piracy Act) and Mozilla. In short, they identify two attributes which are common to all three. First, is the crucial importance of a collaborative purpose that can inspire diverse people to orient their actions towards the same general cause. Second, is the centrality of a platform which seeks to maximize the ability of members to use the organisation for their own purposes, rather than the hierarchical nature of trade unions which focus on effectively implementing plans 'which arise from the complex interaction between the leadership and the rank and file' (Hodder and Edwards, 2015: 847). In the case of Mozilla, its foundation plays the role of orchestrator, coordinating the independent and spontaneous activities of individuals and groups around the world. Fundamental to achieving this is its online platform

which provides several essential resources to those who use it, such as tools (software, videos), connections (organized directories to help people find each other) and information. This helps both to enlist people and to make them more effective.

As Web 1.0 has evolved into the Web 2.0 era, the crucial question that arises concerns the extent to which trade unions have harnessed the potential of social media to enhance transnational solidarity (Hogan et al, 2010). On the national level, recent work in the UK has shown us how trade unions are using social media to communicate with their members and the public (Hodder and Houghton, 2015) and mobilize workers during political and industrial disputes (Upchurch and Grassman, 2016; Wood, 2015; Rego et al, 2016). The views of trade unionists within affiliates of UNI Global Union have also been established (Panagiotopoulos and Barnett, 2015). Within the global unions' literature, however, there have been almost no studies exploring this line of enquiry. Indeed, even the most recent contributions have overlooked the implications of Web 2.0 entirely (Bieler et al, 2015; Scipes, 2016). Even fewer studies have assessed the potential role of new collective actors in this sphere such as USI.

The only exception to this is the limited work examining the case of LabourStart. Whilst this work is useful in providing an initial insight into the organisation's development (Lee, 2007) and social media activities (Dahlberg-Grunberg et al. 2016), it does not provide a holistic account of the organisation and it is worth noting that analysis of LabourStart's online audience was entirely absent from this work.

In light of this discussion, we have identified three lines of inquiry that warrant further investigation in relation to USI, which can be characterized as a 'worker network' using the revised industrial relations framework proposed by Tapia et al (2015: 175). First, what is USI's communication strategy? This is understood as their mission, aims, objectives, channels of communication, message, audience, tools and resources, and vision. Second, who comprises USI's online audience? This question is related to the first in that the effective use of social media requires organisations to actively seek knowledge about the characteristics of their online audience and adapt their communications strategies accordingly (Panagiotopoulos 2012). The presumption is that USI's audience will be mostly found in the Global North due to the constraints of language, and that the level of engagement will be low due to USI's limited human and financial resources. Finally, to what extent does such an organisation permit the development of new collaborative forms of solidarity as suggested by Hecksher and McCarthy (2014)? The following section addresses these questions and discusses their implications for USI's strategy moving forward.

3) Background, data and research methods

USI is based in Glasgow, Scotland, and has a yearly operating budget of about £100,000 pounds.[3] Most of its overhead is provided by Unite the Union and Thomson Solicitors but USI also raises about £30,000 through central donations from trade unions and sympathetic organisations, branch affiliations, and payments for social media training courses. USI is incorporated as a non-governmental organisation with a two-tier governance structure. Its Board of Directors consists of a President and a Director who are responsible for USI's daily operation. The staff consist of an Administrator responsible for communicating with trade unions in the UK and abroad, an Operations Manager who handles the day-to-day social media work, two Coordinators (Beijing and Hong Kong) translating content into Chinese, and two journalists producing original content (they recently joined USI after a merger with their respective news media outlets, Union News UK and Trade Union TV). The advisory board comprises people who are appointed to represent organisations that have endorsed USI or to provide valuable knowledge and skills. It consists of 15 individuals from trade unions in the UK and Ireland, as well as the TUC's international officer and two academics involved in transnational labour solidarity campaigns. On the international level, USI has received formal endorsements from unions in Brazil, Italy, Greece, Austria, the United States, South Africa and Australia but these organisations are not represented on the advisory board. None of the positions at USI are democratically elected.

USI's website is hosted on a server created by a left-wing technological membership organisation, Mayfirst.org, which 'engages in building movements by advancing the strategic use and collective control of technology for local struggles, global transformation, and emancipation without borders' (MayFirst 2016). The website serves as the hub of all their social media activities, which include most of the world's most used social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Google+, Instagram, Flipboard, and Sina Weibo (a Chinese micro-blogging website with over 500 million users). This paper examines the activities of USI during the period January-March 2015. In focusing on this three-month period, the study provides an indicative, albeit static, snapshot since USI is a continuously evolving organisation and its activities are likely to vary year on year. Nevertheless, by utilising a mixed-methods approach, our findings provide the first detailed insight into the workings of such an organisation.

Data were gathered through a combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, Google Analytics and thematic analysis of Tweets. Interviews (*n*=3) were conducted with the President, Director and Operations Manager of USI responsible for its USI's strategic direction and daily operation. The interview schedules explored the human

and financial resources of USI and the evolution of its communication strategy, and questioned the interviewees about the content they publish and the online audience that they have developed. The semi-structured approach allowed the interviewer to probe other lines of enquiry that emerged during the interview. All the interviews were transcribed and subject to thematic analysis using a combination of pre-determined and emergent codes (Crabtree and Miller, 1999). The interview data was also used to help guide and support findings that emerged from the other methods employed. Additionally, the interviews provided access to internal USI documents such as annual reports and advisory board reports which proved to be valuable sources of background information that supplemented analysis of content retrieved from USI's website outlining their mission, aims and objectives.

Analysis of their web traffic between January and March 2015 was undertaken using Google Analytics, a free web analytics service that tracks and reports website traffic for organisations. There were a total of 39,917 unique visitors to USI's website in our period of data collection. This information was scrutinized in detail using two features: In-Page Analytics, which shows how users interact with USI's web pages and content; and Audience Data and Reporting, which sheds light on the kind of people they are, where they come from, and how loyal and engaged they are. In doing so we chose to prioritize analysis of the websites audience rather than simply examining its features, which has been the predominant approach of industrial relations scholars (see for example Rego et al. 2014).

Turning to USI's Twitter account, all tweets from @USILive during the same period were collected ($n = 1,239$) using CrowdTangle. Tweets consist of 'short (140-character) text-based updates (although pictures, videos and URLs can be used)' (Hodder and Houghton, 2015: 177). To gain an understanding of the type of content that USI circulates, we subjected these to a thematic analysis as described above. This resulted in thirteen separate categories (See Table 2). Twitter's adoption as a news and micro-blogging service where users and organisations push updates and interact with one another also required us to examine interactivity. While Twitter counts several different types of engagement, we chose to focus exclusively on structural analysis (following Panagiotopoulos, 2015) to examine communication patterns and interactivity, such as use of retweets (representing someone who found a tweet valuable enough to share it with their own followers) and favourites (a way of signalling approval of content and bookmarking it for later consumption). Other techniques for examining Twitter data were considered, such as keyword frequency analysis (Panagiotopoulos, 2015). In terms of keywords, an initial analysis of USI's tweets identified a total of 6,538 separate words across the 1,239 tweets. Once words associated with URLs (e.g. https with 876 instances) were removed, alongside articles, conjunctions and prepositions, the most frequent words (with more than 100 instances) were: News (100 instances); union (203 instances); strike (234 instances); workers (269 instances), with 3,563 words only occurring

once in the data. As such, this was deemed to provide little insight into the content of USI's tweets and therefore not pursued in more detail.

We also subjected the account biographies of @USILive's 6,390 followers to a thematic analysis to identify who was listening to the account. This analysis resulted in 7 categories of followers (see table 6) - people who agreed to receive a daily digest of USILive's tweets in their news feed. Where accounts fitted into multiple categories (e.g. trade union member and Labour Councillor), the first type was taken to be the most important to the user and therefore to USI. It should be noted that are some limitations of our analysis. For example, as analysis was limited to information provided by the user, there are potential issues associated with the user's online presentation of self (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013), which can result in either incomplete or missing information (such as demographic data), or the use of avatars and pseudonyms (Moore and Taylor, 2013). Additionally, Twitter acknowledges that a number of accounts are 'inactive' (Elder, 2013). To make matters more complicated, followers may also be 'Twitter bots' which have been designed to automatically follow users (see Messias et al. 2013). Thus, we acknowledge that 'classification of audience members can only be a rough representation of the true audience' (Hodder and Houghton, 2015: 187). Whilst USI's Twitter profile is public, meaning information about their followers is available to anybody with an Internet connection, we took the decision to not identify individuals apart from those organisations that would legitimately expect their presence on social media to be public.

4) Findings

4.1) USI's Communication Strategy

Mission, Aims and Objectives

USI's mission is to build grassroots transnational labour solidarity using the latest digital technology, and has multiple aims: to promote and support solidarity campaigns with trade unions and others in countries worldwide; to identify and propose practical solidarity initiatives and to raise additional funding for such projects; to encourage greater understanding of international issues within trade unions and progressive social and community organisations; to assist in the development of effective international education; to campaign on solidarity activities promoting human and trade union rights; and to promote social and cultural links between countries based on the principles of international solidarity (USI 2016a).

To achieve these aims, USI has identified three key objectives.

The *first* objective is to connect trade unionists around the world through campaigns, fundraising, web conferencing, blog posts written by activists and academics, and information exchange.

The *second* objective is to build a global constituency that can be mobilised quickly around particular issues and international trade union solidarity campaigns.

The *third* objective is to develop a campaign and communication course for trade union activists that can help union members and activists understand how to effectively spread their message using social media.

Channels of Communication

The primary channels of communication USI employs are its website and social media channels. These are used to disseminate news content and act as a funnel of engagement that helps them identify individuals who can be mobilized into organising at the grassroots level and taking some form of action. USI's Operations Manager explained the concept as follows:

> "Our website and social media streams are the outer rim; you try and capture people's interest and then funnel it down to the point at which they will willingly click the button that says sign up and give you their information. Then we start developing these people into activists with concrete actions to engage in, such as linking them to a global union campaign in their sector or in the company group that they are a part of."

Once readers have volunteered information about where they are physically, what unions they are in, what companies they work for, and what issues they are interested in, every subsequent interaction is registered in a database using a Constituent Relationship Management (CRM) software. This way, when relevant campaigns appear, USI can send targeted information to activists about ways to get involved when people are needed on the ground to make things happen. The decision to eschew the use of online petitions in favour of trying to mobilize a small number of people to engage in physical actions is based on the belief that it has a far greater chance of effecting meaningful change, as USI's Operations Manager explained:

> "We thought as a strategy it is probably the most useful thing that you can do with new technology. In other words, not keep it in cyberspace and try to remember that its real people that you are engaging with, it's not just Facebook likes and retweets. Signing an Avaaz petition is fine, but we would really rather mobilize five or ten

people to do something really practical in their branch or whatever it is that might actually have a real influence."

Message

The overlying rationale for the content that USI posts on its website and social media streams is to construct a meta-narrative that continuously highlights the role that trade unions play in improving working conditions around the world. Additionally, it is aimed at helping people to understand that stories about industrial disputes, precarity, austerity and other related issues are not isolated incidents, but rather interconnected manifestations of contemporary capitalism and politics. About half of the content is sourced from mainstream and alternative news media, trade unions and NGOs. In practice, trigger events such as austerity negotiations in Greece play a key role in the selection process because they create a sudden desire among people to get involved; USI then tries to find relevant content and promotes campaigns which are looking for support. The other half of the content that USI disseminates is produced by USI's two journalists and, occasionally, academics who write guest contributions (interview data, 18/11/2015).

As an editorial strategy USI only publishes what the former Director called 'non-contentious content'. This includes "critiques of neoliberalism, austerity, political and industrial strategies designed to weaken trade unionism" but excludes "all issues where it became party political, such as critiquing a social-democratic party or the policies of radical left-wing parties". From time to time the advisory board is consulted to help determine whether content or requests to share and promote certain campaigns is too contentious and may undermine the on-going work of other groups. By staying out of party-politics USI hopes to reduce the possibility that some organisations either refuse to get involved or actively seek to undermine them because of their political stance.

Audience

USI's main target audiences are union activists and young people. Whilst USI has clear ambitions about their global reach, in practice the organisation consciously focus their activities on meeting the demands of the specific national segments of the world's population that are engaging with them online, as this quote from USI's Director illustrates:

> "In the beginning, we focused on the UK and Ireland but as the project rapidly evolved we had to adapt. We were looking at the audience on our website, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and what was emerging was that we were developing core audiences in North America and Greece in the initial 12 months of our project so we

had to respond by talking more about North American issues to engage that audience. Then, as the project evolved, we began writing about issues in the Asian Subcontinent, especially China, and began developing audiences in these countries."

USI is also aware that different social media platforms are needed to reach different target audiences. To ensure that they are reaching young people, USI has begun to build a presence on Instagram and Pinterest which have become very popular among this demographic.

Education and Tools

USI offers a popular social media course to trade union officials and activists which highlights the advantages and disadvantages of specific social media platforms. From their perspective, Facebook has several limitations: it is designed to monetise the data you enter (friends, opinions, ideas); it charges individuals or groups to increase the reach of their message; and is accessible to spies in the NSA and GCHQ. In contrast, Twitter is viewed as a far more effective tool for communicating, with a simple interface and hashtags and mentions that make it very easy to find information. The drawback of the latter, though, is that it leaves the user exposed because anyone can attack something you tweet. Moreover, the re-tweet function means that content you post can go viral without your consent; Twitter therefore needs to be treated with caution (USI 2016b).

As part of these educational activities, the advisory board has come to function as a discussion forum in which USI and the social media company that helped develop their digital infrastructure, Mass 1, have been engaging in an ongoing dialogue with representatives of trade unions in the UK and Ireland about social media and digital platforms (interview data, 27/10/2016).

USI also offers its users an alternative open source platform called the Organising Network, developed using Elgg,[4] to provide a safe space beyond corporate control that enables grassroots organising and democratic decision-making. The Director of USI explained its purpose as follows:

"To ensure that activists can reach their own audiences directly – without filters, without impediments, without having to artificially reach people through promoting posts – in a private sphere, where they can strategize about how to organise in communities and companies without the preying eyes of employers and intelligence services."

In short, the Organising Network allows users to create groups, organize meetings, share documentation, make proposals and vote on them, and communicate using a multi-lingual web-conferencing system. USI believes that it could be a useful and innovative addition to how the labour movement works because it would allow those who are unable to participate regularly in face-to-face meetings due to family and work commitments, and geographical restraints. Unfortunately, USI has been unable to promote, develop and maintain the Organising Network due to a lack of human and financial resources (interview data, 26/10/2016). This helps to explain why user uptake of the platform has been so modest. It is therefore a long way away from developing network externalities whereby the greater the user base the greater are the individual benefits (Bryson et al. 2010: 49).

Finally, USI offers its users two free open-source multi-lingual conferencing systems to help coordinate transnational struggles. The Big Blue Button is a sophisticated video conferencing system which allows up to 25 participants to conduct meetings, with the possibility of uploading slides and documents, and annotating them. Whereas Mexcla is an experimental audio-only conferencing system that supports two languages, and allows for simultaneous translation. It is being developed with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF).

Vision

USI's vision for the future is centred upon improving their organisational capacity and increasing the size and reach of their online audience. Key to this are the recent mergers with Union News and Trade Union TV. While the merger with the former brought on board someone specializing in YouTube, the merger with the latter brought on board an ex-journalist who was very adept at writing news. Geographically, the mergers also increased their coverage; USI now has staff in Ireland (Trade Union TV) and the South of England (Union News), as well as the core team based in Glasgow, Scotland. By merging with organisations that have different audiences, USI avoids duplication. Moving forward the aim is to merge with the Global Labour Institute. Based in Manchester, it specializes in education and has strong relations with global unions which would allow USI to further develop their social media training course. Finally, USI plans to use its Client Building Software to ask people to engage in actions and develop an automated online interface on their website which connects activists directly to ongoing campaigns in their local area/sector/industry (interview data, 18/11/2015).

In view of this insight into USI's communication strategy, we now consider the main points of interest in detail. What follows is a more in depth analysis of different channels of

communication (their website and Twitter account) to provide an indicative explanation of the type of content USI is disseminating, what level of interaction they are generating, and who they are reaching.

4.2 USI's channels of communication

As mentioned earlier, USI's website had a total of 39,917 unique visitors between Jan 1 and March 31 2015. This figure represents the number of individual devices that accessed the website during this period. 51 percent used a desktop, 38 per cent used a mobile and 11 per cent used a tablet. By itself, however, the total number of unique visitors tells us very little about the extent of user engagement with USI's content. To understand this, we looked at how long each of these individuals spent on the website consuming content. This was achieved in three steps. The first step broke down the total number of visits according to session duration and page views, which amounted to 47,562 visits[5] and 65,235 page views. The second step excluded those who spent less than one minute on the website, since it is almost impossible to read a substantial amount of an article's content and argument in that amount of time. This amounted to 90 percent of the abovementioned visits and 70 percent of page views. In the third step, we divided the remaining visitor data according to session duration. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 about here

In the first three months of 2015, USI's website had a total of 4,884 visitors, who viewed 19,803 pages. This amounts to a monthly average of 1,628 visitors and 6,601page views. Breaking these figures down according to session duration allowed us to divide users into four tiers. The first tier represents 279 individuals who spent more than 30 minutes on the website and accounted for 19 percent of all page views – a very high number considering the small size of the group. The second tier represents 1,218 people who displayed a more moderate level of engagement. The remaining two tiers represent 3,477 people (71 percent of all users) who displayed a weak level of user engagement. The question is whether USI can convert all these people into activists willing to share their personal details and assist global union campaigns by organising. One way of proceeding could be to focus ones' limited resources on those who display the highest level of engagement.

Turning to USI's Twitter account, according to Twitter's own analytics tool, @USILive tweets about 30 times a day and each tweet is seen by about 200 people on average. However, for the period 1st January-31st March 2015, this equated to an average of 13 tweets per day. Over the course of an average month, Twitter's analytics show that USI's tweets are typically seen by about 200,000 people, with 41 per cent based in the United Kingdom and 20

per cent based in the United States. The remainder are to be found in countries with large English-speaking populations (interview data, 18/11/2015) as will be discussed later.

4.3 Message analysis

In examining the content of the tweets between January 1 and March 31 2015 ($n = 1,239$), our analysis found that about two-thirds of tweets were original, and one-third were re-tweets of posts by other Twitter users. In terms of overall engagement, USI generated 13,299 favourites and 11,405 retweets during the period in question. Table 2 examines the relationship between the type of tweet and level of engagement. It shows that 84 per cent of all tweets included links to articles and about 10 per cent include links to videos and photos. Interestingly, audio-visual content makes up a small amount of the content they circulate but accounts for a large share of total engagement: 41 per cent of favourites and about 36 per cent of retweets.

** Table 2 about here**

The thematic analysis resulted in thirteen categories (See Table 3). The two main categories of note were 'mobilisations' (20.8 per cent), which included tweets concerning a general strike by Norwegian Teachers against precarious work and an industry-wide strike in the Italian financial sector, and 'unionisation and workplace regulation' (11.1 per cent), which included tweets concerning Sweden's success in unionising retail workers and the ongoing campaign effort in India to address poor work conditions in the brick industry. Together these two categories accounted for almost one-third of all tweets. Surprisingly, only 4.4 per cent of all tweets related were displays of solidarity, and only 3.2 per cent related to global conflicts.

** Table 3 about here**

In addition, we can see that tweets concerning the following themes account for most of total engagement: mobilisations, freedom of speech, political analysis, global conflicts, political analysis, privatisation and austerity and critical economics. Precarity, unionisation and workplace regulation, education and social dumping and layoffs account for the least amount of engagement. In a separate analysis we examined the combined level of engagement for each individual tweet and found that the great majority of tweets (89 percent) generated

between one and nine retweets and favourites, while just over 10 per cent had between 10 and 500. Only five tweets could be considered to have gone viral with over 500 (0.5 per cent). Each of these individual interactions nevertheless has great potential value for organisations attempting to enlist people because they represent the beginning of a conversation. Following up on these conversations, however, requires a lot of time and energy. The problem for USI is that the process of sourcing content is so resource-intensive that they often have little time for engaging with users. Indeed, both USI's former Director and Operations Manager stressed how difficult it was to manage all the social media streams which requires them to continuously post content, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

4.3 Audience analysis

Finally, we turn to our analysis of who USI is interacting with. Geographically, Table 4 reveals that 70 per cent of Website users are based in the United Kingdom (52%), the United States (14.16%) and Ireland (3.80%). Whilst this means that only 30 per cent of USI's users would be able to physically assist global union campaigns outside of these three countries, there are other ways that USI's followers would be able to engage in solidarity action, for example by signing online petitions or sending emails to corporate executives and politicians. That said, many transnational corporations have offices in the UK and the United States, meaning there are plenty of targets for on-the-ground mobilisations. Ireland, for example, is a well-known tax haven for the world's largest IT companies such as Google, Apple and Facebook. The remaining users are in countries with high numbers of English speakers: Germany, France, Canada, India, and Spain. The only exception here is China, where it is difficult to know exactly how many of its population are English-speaking (Wei and Su, 2012). This was possible because USI's two China Coordinators were paying contributors to translate content during this period (they have since been let go due to resource constraints). Data from the website therefore supports the hypothesis that most of USI's audience is based in the Global North.

** Table 4 about here**

Unfortunately, it was not possible to provide insight into USI's database of newsletter subscribers because the data they had collected from thousands of people was lost after their website was hacked. One possible motive offered by USI's Operations Manager was their publication of content relating to the Kurdish resistance to ISIS, which included several articles written by trade unionists involved in a solidarity campaign. Another was that it was the work of Israeli counter-intelligence who were seeking to undermine the hosting company because it was hosting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement which works to end

international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law.

> "It could have been someone who wanted to attack everything they could get a hold of on that server. They host the BDS movements main website, so at one point they were getting all the resources of the Israeli counter intelligence teams attacking them on a weekly basis. It made me realise that keeping too much activist stuff on one server is not ideal, so we moved to a smaller hosting company and now get daily back-ups."

Whatever the motive, the Director of USI felt that is was a sign that they were beginning to reach a critical mass worth disrupting.

> "I think someone wanted to hack our website because of the audience we had developed. We had just reached the point where we had thousands of people in our database that we were going to begin mobilising. Our mergers with Trade Union TV had given us one of the largest YouTube audiences for a trade union organisation in the world, and we had an audience on our website of thousands of people per year as well as our Weibo stream in China. It was at that juncture, when we brought all those streams together, that our website gets hacked."

The hack exemplifies one of the ways in which the Internet can be a hostile place for trade union organisations. Moving forward, the ability to implement measures that can safeguard the privacy of those who interact with them and prevent disruption will become of increasing importance. Indeed, after the hack, USI moved to a smaller hosting company doing daily back-ups of their data.

We add to this analysis by examining the audience of USI's Twitter account. At the end of data collection (in 2015), @USILive was followed by 6,390 accounts. This is on par with TUC's global stream but less than UNI Global union and LabourStart, which can be explained by the fact that they are a relatively new organisation which joined Twitter three years later (See Table 5).

** Table 5 about here**

Coding of USI's followers resulted in seven categories and was based upon information provided in their Twitter 'bios' (see Table 6). The two main categories of note were unsurprisingly related to trade unionism, accounting for almost a quarter of all followers (22.752%). Firstly, 12.85% of all followers identified as members or officials of trade unions. These individuals were mainly from British unions, although international union members and officials did choose to follow USI. Secondly, 9.87% of accounts were in the name of unions or related pro-worker campaigns. Union accounts in this category tended to be UK based, and included the main accounts for national unions such as UNISON, (@Unisontweets), the Australian based AMWU (@theamwu), regional committees such as Unite London (@unitelondon, and young members' groups such as Future TSSA (@futureTSSA). Examples of pro-worker campaign accounts included organisations such as the American-based North Bay Jobs With Justice (@nbjwj).

** Table 6 about here**

The other categories of note are outlined as follows. Organizations accounted for 8.03% of accounts, and ranged from ballet companies such as The Crossword Ballet (@CrosswordBallet), theatre companies such as Red Ladder Theatre (@RedLadderTheatr) and political organisations such as WikiLeaks (@wikileaks). A small number (1.77%) of followers described themselves as academics, and these individuals ranged from PhD students to professors, interested in labour issues. Given that one of the aims of USI is to promote pro-union news stories, it is perhaps surprising that only 1.52% of followers could be categorised as either press organisations, journalists or photographers. Accounts included the Irish Newspaper An Phoblacht (@An_Phoblacht) and a number of individuals that worked for newspapers such as The Guardian. The smallest category was that of politician, and accounts in this category were mainly candidates or post holders for political parties including the Labour Party and the Scottish National Party. However, the largest category was 'Other'. Accounts in this category either provided no information in their 'bio', reflecting the issues with Twitter accounts and 'bots' (see Elder 2013 and Messias et al, 2013), or information that was deemed irrelevant to USI, such as 'Dream Surfer' or 'rugby fan'.

5) Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined the activities of USI, a new actor in the international union arena. Such an organisation is of academic interest in a context where labour organisations continue to face negative receptions in the mainstream media and unions increasingly turn to social media platforms to improve their visibility. As such, our paper contributes to both the

existing debates on transnational labour solidarity and on industrial relations actors, communication and social media. USI has a clear mission: to enhance transnational labour solidarity utilising the latest developments in digital technology. Analysis of their social media posts on Twitter shows that the provision of content is designed to constantly emphasise the activities of trade unions across different parts of the world and draw in people who may be willing to engage in solidarity campaigns. While there is evidence that USI is developing an international audience, there are however three factors constraining its ability to mobilize its users to engage in collective action on a global scale.

Geographically, most of their users are in the English-speaking world, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. Moreover, due to resource constraints (financial, time and personnel), USI is not fully able to utilise the benefits of Web 2.0 technologies in terms of user interaction and engagement, a problem which trade unions also encounter (Hodder and Houghton, 2015). Then there is USI's vulnerability to cyber-attacks which has prevented them from using their CRM database. The hack is a cautionary story that demonstrates the necessity of taking the threat seriously and investing in cyber-security. Another hack could limit any future growth in the number of activists using USI's Organising Network if they have a legitimate fear that their personal data may be compromised. Indeed, the likelihood of USI being the target of another attack are quite high. As McChesney (2013: 130-171) has pointed out, the Internet has been embraced by the military and national security agencies who are using it to monitor and suppress industrial organisation and political dissent, especially in countries with particularly repressive governments and employers. One potential way to combat this threat could be to create alliances with digital activists who are at the forefront of challenging the mass surveillance regime (Dencik and Wilkin 2015).

Having provided insight into USI's communication strategy and an indicative snapshot of their media activities, we consider the extent to which USI is laying the ground for the development of new collaborative forms of solidarity (Heckscher and McCarthy, 2014). In terms of collaborative purpose and a utility-maximizing platform, the two key attributes to effective collective action on a global scale, USI has succeeded in nurturing them, notwithstanding the problems encountered by individual unions and GUFs in their attempts to build global solidarity (Anner et al, 2006; Fairbrother et al, 2014). Furthermore, the growing number of affiliations from trade unions in the UK and abroad suggest that USI's mission is enabling unions to get involved in its collaborative purpose.

What is lacking, however, are democratic mechanisms which could allow and encourage affiliated organisations and individual activists from around the world to get involved, putting aside issues associated with 'armchair activism' or 'clicktivism' (Karpf, 2010). For example, by adopting a membership governance model, USI could bring on board representatives of sympathetic organisations such as global unions and activist groups that could contribute to its technological development and broaden its bases of social support. Finally, while USI's free resources seek to maximise the ability of its users to organise independent actions and

assist ongoing transnational campaigns (namely, the Organising Network and its web-conferencing system) they will need much greater funding if they are to evolve and grow.

This raises the spectre of the multi-faceted problem of *governance* understood as USI's organisational structure and the decision-making processes that enable it to act and persist in relation to its members and constituents. As a new organisation, it needs to decide how best to ensure continuity and coherence moving forward. The most pressing issue is arguably the need for funds. This exposes them to the dangers of entryism. Moreover, the creation of a fee-paying membership comprising individuals and organisations gives rise to the difficult issues of accountability and democracy in terms of entitlements offered to members, the level of input members have in policy-formulation and the extent to which the organisation can ensure that decisions made are perceived to be legitimate and representative of the organisation.

In conclusion, after three years of existence USI is helping to raise awareness of labour issues in the US, UK and Ireland. However, the question of whether USI can live up to its promising potential and expand their geographic reach depends on their ability to improve funding and further develop free resources, adopt appropriate democratic mechanisms to increase their personnel and news production while maintaining integrity, and prevent future cyber-attacks and infiltration.

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[1] Global unions include the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, Global Union Federations (GUFs), and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

[2] The membership figure only includes those who have used Facebook in the past 30 days.

[3] This figure represents annual expenditure and was sourced from their Annual Report.

[4] Elgg is an award-winning social networking engine, delivering the building blocks that enable businesses, schools, universities and associations to create their own fully featured social networks and applications. It was created by the Occupy Wall Street Tech Committee for political organising (see Elgg, 2016).

[5] This includes returning visits and is therefore higher than the previously cited figure.

Table 1. Session duration, number of unique visits and page views: Jan 1 - March 31 2015

Session Duration	Visits (% of total)	Page Views (% of total)
1 minute – 3 minutes	1,863 (38%)	5,155 (26%)
3 minutes – 10 minutes	1,614 (33%)	5,793 (29%)
10 minutes – 30 minutes	1,128 (23%)	5,100 (26%)
30 minutes +	279 (6%)	3,755 (19 %)
Total	**4,884**	**19,803**

Table 2. USI Twitter Account: Tweets by Type and Level and of Engagement

Type	% of Total Tweets	Sum of Favourites	Sum of Retweets
Link	84	3,964	4,311
Photo	6	5,198	3,903
Tweet	6	3,901	3,020
Video	4	236	171
Total	**100**	**13,299**	**11,405**

Source: Author's calculations on USI dataset.

Table 3. USI Twitter Account: Tweets by Theme and Level of Engagement

Category	N	% of total tweets	Sum of Favourites	Sum of Retweets
Mobilisations (impending or ongoing protests, demonstrations and strikes)	258	20.8	1,011	1,211
Freedom of speech (repression of journalists and activists)	31	2.5	2,855	1,855

Solidarity (displays of solidarity and campaigns in need of support)	54	4.4	114	302
Precarity (precarious employment)	42	3.4	61	137
Global conflicts (geo-political conflicts and war)	40	3.2	1,714	729
Political analysis (local, regional, national and international politics)	100	8.1	1,409	1,240
Unionisation and workplace regulation	138	11.1	127	317
Education (issues and struggles taking place within the education sector)	46	3.7	86	148
Income inequality (inegalitarian distribution, declining wages and pay discrepancies)	81	6.5	452	512
Social dumping and layoffs (union busting, outsourcing and redundancies in the public and private sector)	28	2.3	46	28
Privatization and austerity	67	5.4	809	818
Critical economics (critiques of neoliberalism and heterodox economists)	48	3.9	608	864
Other	306	24.7	3,998	3,242
Total	**1239**	**100**	**13,299**	**11,405**

Source: Author's calculations on USI dataset.

Table 4. Country origin of visitors according to number of page views (Jan 1 – March 31, 2015)

Country	Page views	Percentage of Total
1. United Kingdom	24,739	52.01 %
2. United States	6,735	14.16 %
3. Ireland	1,806	3.80 %
4. China	1,553	3.27 %
5. Canada	1,405	2.95 %
6. Australia	843	1.77 %
7. Germany	821	1.73 %
8. France	721	1.52 %
9. India	648	1.36 %
10. Spain	534	1.12 %

Table 5 examines @USILive's Twitter performance in relation to six other international union organisations.

Organisation	Year Joined	Tweets	Following	Followers
USI	2011	30,000	9,233	8,436
IUF Global Union	2011	1,980	1,128	2,411
UNI Global Union	2008	8,204	2,323	10,500
TUC Global Stream	2010	26,500	1,433	8,616
Justice for Colombia	2009	2,892	2,066	3,557

| Cuba Solidarity | 2009 | 3,895 | 2,842 | 5,472 |
| LabourStart1 | 2008 | 22,000 | 5,273 | 16,800 |

*These totals were taken on November 14, 2016.

Table 6. Follower Categories

Follower Category	N	%
Union official/member	821	12.85
Union branch/committee/pro-worker campaigns	631	9.87
Organisations	513	8.03
Academics	113	1.77
Press/photographers	97	1.52
Political candidates/political parties (Labour, SNP)	75	1.17
Other	4,140	64.79
Total	**6,390**	**100.00**

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1 This is LabourStart's main Twitter account but they have 17 other accounts covering individual nations. 78