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Striking with Social Media:

The contested (online) terrain of workplace conflict

Abstract

In this paper we review the workplace battleground and explore the potential of social media for mobilizing social movements in labour conflicts and beyond. By conducting a case study with empirical accounts obtained from the 2010/2011 British Airways cabin crew dispute in the UK, along with secondary sources, we discern social media in the workplace as a contested field. Inquiring into the unfolding dynamic of social media and workplace conflict, we investigate the mobilizing prospects of theoretical concepts like 'distributed discourse' and 'accelerated pluralism' through the analytical prism of our interviews (Bimber, 1998; Greene et al, 2003). Our analysis of these empirical accounts will tease out certain empowering potentials in the use of social media to shape discourse and mobilize movement. However, we also note that these same communicative actions may challenge internal union authority, generate counter-mobilizing efforts and constitute an integral part in exposing both our private and working lives to the processes of marketization and commodification.

Key Words:

Social media

Social movements

Trade unions

Workplace conflict

Introduction

The advent of social media has enhanced debates on the effects of information and communication technology (ICT) in the workplace. New forms of web based communication (WBC) such as those associated with internet based email discussion forum (Web 1.0) or with interactive social media, blogs, and Wikis (Web 2.0), undoubtedly demand empirical recalibration to better account for these emergent 'virtual' spaces.

The history of such technologies is very recent, and experience of evaluating effects more tenuous as a consequence. The first text message was sent and received just over twenty years ago. Hypertext first enabled web based communication, and was created in 1989, the Google search engine appeared on the scene in 1998, Facebook in 2004, and YouTube in 2005. Twitter was launched in 2006, but now records over 500 million daily tweets, while Facebook recorded its one-billionth user in October 2012. In the light of such proliferation the usefulness of social media in facilitating or even inspiring social movements from below, becomes all the more imperative, in and beyond the workplace. Indeed recent geo-political developments have generated a wide array of voices that now place emphasis on the significant role that social media played in unleashing the viral spread of popular dissent in the Arab Spring (e.g. Rane and Salem, 2012, Mason, 2012), and in other arenas of struggle around the world.

This is not to say that one can draw any simple analogies from these events to the potential that these technologies may serve in mobilizing power within workplace conflicts. One needs to tread carefully and not let the impact of the technologies eclipse the way they are embedded with, and dependent on the social actors and agendas that they communicate and

help mobilise. In other words, the revolutionising effect that these technologies appear to have on revolution itself, may displace the perception of political causality from content to medium. Paraphrasing Marshall McLuhan's famous dictum, Bimber (1998: 136) makes this point crystal clear; 'the medium is *not* the whole message'. In other words, an exaggerated emphasis on technology as the driving force behind social movements might accentuate a reluctance to appreciate content, as in the actual issues and grievances under dispute. Posed against such 'techno-centrism', Fuchs (2012a: 386) derides explanations of riots and rebellions in which social media is perceived as the engine, claiming it to represent a 'fetishism of things....a deterministic instrumental ideology that substitutes thinking about society with a focus on technology'.

Of particular interest within these debates is the role and potential of social media to transform and even revitalise workers' collective action and organisation against the employer. Much has been written on trade union use of the web, either as a tool for organising or as a vehicle by which existing power relations (such as employer and union leaderships) can be challenged (Hogan and Greene, 2002; Cockfield, 2005: Martinez Lucio and Walker, 2005: Mosco, 2014).

In our review of the workplace battleground through the lens of social media impact, we observe concepts such as 'distributed discourse' and 'accelerated pluralism' (Greene et al., 2003; Bimber, 1998). Distributed discourse essentially captures the way in which social media, with its wide accessibility and facility to interact, may distribute power by means of democratizing the tools of discourse framing (Greene et al., 2003). According to Greene et al. (2003) these developments may have an impact within union decision-making, as much as against the dispute adversary in the workplace conflict. In a similar vein accelerated pluralism

draws on the radical increase in access and interactivity provided by social media, but rather point towards the lowering of barriers this may entail, not just in ordering discourse but in mobilizing a plurality of grievances into separate and/or consolidated social movements (Bimber, 1998). In this paper we explore these concepts through relevant empirical findings derived from a case study of workplace relations at British Airways during the 2010/2011 cabin crew dispute.

Before we turn to this dispute, let us sum up the introduction by outlining the way we situate these accounts theoretically in the paper. Firstly, we introduce the theoretical backdrop of the workplace as contested terrain in association with social media by focusing on the following points. We suggest there is some evidence from our case that social media can act to enhance collective workplace action by aiding processes of both distributed discourse and accelerated pluralism. However, the possibilities of challenging hierarchies and power-based structures within unions are constrained within the democratic decision-making processes of the unions. Moreover, in the section on 'counter-mobilisation' we consider how employers may undermine mobilizing efforts by using social media as an instrument of surveillance against trade unions and individual employees. Secondly, in a brief methodology section describing the research process, we unpack the practical and contextual aspects associated with our empirical inquiry. Most importantly, our case study and its empirical analysis provides an important contribution to the understanding of social media and social movements in relation to trade unions.

A Promised Land for Worker Collectivisation?

The usefulness of information and communication technology (ICT) to aid and enhance prospects for collectivisation of worker action through trade unions has generated

considerable debate (Hogan and Greene, 2002: Mosco, 2014). The earlier debates on Web 1.0 internet networking generally offered an optimistic view for worker collective action. The tendency to inflate the value of internet technology as the engine of movements possibly reflected a body of thought emphasising the autonomous and voluntarist processes by which transformative change takes place. In particular, Castells, both in his monumental trilogy *The Information Age* (1996) and his more recent *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012), places ICT as the *root* of modern social change, whereby the 'net' replaces hierarchies as the dominant form of social organisation, and the individual constructs her self-identity within the same technologically based process.

For Hardt and Negri (2000: 285) industrial production has been 'informationalised' and incorporated into 'communication technologies', '…in a way that transforms the production process itself'. We might argue that Hardt and Negri sidestep not only the material basis for change, but also the importance of the agents of change, historically rooted in class formation and contestation. Kevin Doogan, in *New Capitalism*, thus describes such side-stepping as an academic expression of *dematerialisation,* whereby the 'death' of distance and time lends to the concept of a weightless world, in which there is a separation of motion and matter. In such a vision we appear to move beyond techno-centrism into a world where the transmission of knowledge becomes a fetish in itself. This is despite, as Doogan argues, the salient fact that 'the production and consumption of knowledge remains materialist even if its circulation is immaterial' (Doogan, 2009: 50).

We suggest that notwithstanding the *pessimism* of the efficacy of the promised land of a 'weightless world' the continued *optimism* for the reinvigoration of collective action has been based on two key propositions - that of 'distributed discourse' and the associated possibility

of mobilisation effects achieved through processes of 'accelerated pluralism'. We deal with each of these aspects below.

Distributed Discourse – a weapon for or against the union?

Optimists in the debate have focused on the alleged benefits of *e-collectivism* (Hogan and Greene, 2002) or *cyber-unionism* (Shostak, 1999; Freeman and Rogers, 2002; Hogan *et al*, 2010). This is because of the open access to the web that is (seemingly) outside the control of the employer and the state. This open access is enhanced by its speed of application, and its increasing user-friendliness combined with ever-increasing computer literacy in developed and increasingly in developing economies. East Africa, for example, received its first broadband connection in 2009. By 2011, 74 per cent of the population in Europe had access to the internet compared to 27 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, and only 13 per cent in Africa (International Telecommunications Union, 2013). The speed and growing universality allows a compression of time and space which could counter the advantage of employers in distributing information from a particular workplace to possibly even a global dimension, and thus open a new public sphere for more horizontal communicative action (cf. Habermas, 1989).

For trade unions, from an optimistic perspective, Shostak presented a scenario whereby they are encouraged to 'get on board' the new information super highway, promising a future which 'enables unions to improve their image and vision of a successful twenty-first century union, including long-term goals, strategic options, and priorities needed to come closer to matching their profile' (Shostak, 1999: 125). This *nirvana* of trade union internet professionalism would be achieved through regular surveys of members' opinions 'to learn in depth their needs and wants, their dreams and nightmares', and to learn from the rank-

and-file by regular email correspondence with union officers that 'promises personal responses within 72 hours' (*ibid*, 113). Cyber-unionism was also the promised vehicle not only for enhancing the union's communications approach and sharpening debate about industrial strategy, but also a link to a new wave global internationalism and a reinvigoration of the rank-and-file. A foremost advocate of internet internationalism is Eric Lee, who established *LabourStart* in 1997 and had 500 subscribers a year later. The purpose of the site was to provide a source of information and campaigning for global labour concerns and disputes. By 2010 the site had over 60,000 subscribers and was offered in 23 language editions with an average of 250 stories per day. PayPal is now used for solidarity fund raising. Alongside *LabourStart*, similar sites have emerged across the world such as *Radio Labour*, *Labor Notes* and *UnionBook*, some endorsed officially by trade union federations, and some independent initiatives from labour activists[i].

The open nature allows for possibilities of 'distributed discourse' both within and beyond the workplace (Greene *et al*, 2003). This perspective presents opportunities for collective action from below to be enhanced by the networked effect of providing counter-information and campaigning against the hegemony wielded by global capital:

> 'Global organization and coordination need no longer be solely the province of large companies, governments and international agencies. Global communication is now a routine everyday practice and it provides for a new speed or velocity in campaigning and bargaining...' (Hogan *et al*, 2010: 29).

It is claimed that such distributed discourse has the power to upset power relations within the trade unions as rank-and-file networks can utilise the web to challenge the bureaucratic

conservatism of trade union leaderships. An oft-quoted example is the case of the Liverpool dockers, and their use of the internet to create solidarity networks beyond the shores of the UK. Carter *et al* (2003: 295) followed earlier work by Hazen (1993) in utilising the discourse of language and power embraced in the concept of polyphony, '...the discourses of the oppressed and the excluded will automatically be "sources of change, since they are different from the discourses of power"' (Hazen, 1993: 21). In doing so they were adopting Foucauldian theory (1972) linking language, discourse and power in an 'order of discourse.' This perspective argues that discourse is constructed and contained through existing power apparatus and structures. Thus upsetting the pattern and mode of discourse 'from below' may act to challenge power and authority transmitted 'from above'.

The way in which distributed discourse in terms of social media accessibility and its concomitant wide global reach may be used as a weapon by the union against the dispute adversary is perhaps rather clear in light of the above. But let us also consider how it may be a challenge to the very leadership within the union itself. If one agrees that the order of discourse in trade unions is in large part constructed by union leaders and expressed through channels of communication that reinforce hierarchical authority and the centralisation of power it would follow that alternative voices and discourses of struggle conveyed through social media, may be equally challenging and subversive of union leadership and its formalized structures of communication (see also Ward and Lusoli, 2002).

In terms of collective workplace action and solidarity, we must assess the ability of web based communication to transcend not just the content but more importantly the *form of power and authority* in trade unions (Martinez Lucio, 2003; Martinez Lucio and Walker, 2005). In a recent review of trade union use of the internet more generally, Richards (2010:

10) concludes that trade union members are 'more intense users of ICTs than their non-unionised counterparts'. However, the open and unmediated nature of social media is likely to be at odds with the principle of internal union bureaucratized democracy. In other words, the 'horizontalist' forms of distributing the means of expression and the framing of discourse endemic to social media, may clash directly with the particularly 'verticalist' committee-level based conventions of union decision-making (see also Saundry *et al*, 2007).

Accelerated Pluralism – from discourse to movement

In addition to distributing the means of discourse it has been argued that the internet may enhance revitalisation of trade unions through 'mobilisation' effects theorised by commentators on social movements. In adapting mobilisation theory to unions new frames of reference might be constructed which *attribute* blame to management for deteriorating working conditions and accumulated grievances, before acting to *mobilise* the discontent (McAdam, 1988; Kelly, 1998).

The trade union, as the collective representative of workers, has a central role in engendering this process of mobilisation through its own leadership and the way it presents an alternative set of beliefs to that given by management and the employer more generally. Such mobilisation can take place at the micro-level of the individual workplace (for an example of a workplace 'culture of solidarity', see Fantasia, 1988). It may also occur at the national level of a union (Author Aand other), and embrace activity 'beyond the workplace' by encouraging engagement with more diverse groups and new social movements (Greene and Kirton, 2003). In such cases, engagement with the union's goals engendered through union-inspired activity, and the inverse phenomenon of disengagement with those of the employer, act to alter the consciousness of workers at both the individual and collective level.

For Kelly and Kelly (1994), in addressing these processes together with the psychology of collective action in the workplace, the most significant correlates of union participation was the strength of group identification, followed by collectivist orientation and the degree to which the out-group (management) were perceived in stereotypical fashion. Indeed, the sense of 'them and us' is a key determinant of willingness to take collective workplace action (Benford and Snow, 2000; Soule and Olzak, 2004).

In this respect, Bimber (2008) claims that web based communication can act to create a process of 'accelerated pluralism' whereby the obstacles to activism in the form of bureaucratic and structural constraints will be lowered. The implication is that if trade unions utilise social media to identify and isolate the employer as the source of grievance, than the prospects of collective mobilisation and identification with the union are enhanced. For example, we can consider the impact that the web has had on the ability of employees to 'turn the table' on employers by monitoring and exposing employers' own (mis-)behaviour and corporate negligence (Mathieson, 1997). In this respect the internet may act to boost the 'shadow side' of organisations, acting as an informal conduit of information, gossip and calls to action as an 'inverted panopticon' (cf Lim, 2007). However, we should never underestimate the way these same social media that tend to distribute discourse and accelerate pluralism, may at the same time bring forth a certain sense of vulnerability.

Counter-Mobilisation: Surveillance, self-monitoring and virtualizing activity

Within the contested workplace terrain we discern some necessary caveats to the potential power of the web to upset traditional hierarchical relationships in the workplace, and to consider its limitations in transforming collective worker action. Faced with the threat from

below of potential exposure of corporate unethical misbehaviour as well as new forms of communication technology outside their control, employers have sought to not only regain control but also to suppress those opportunities for dissent which may have been enhanced by web based communication. Employers have also shifted their gaze and efforts at control from within the workplace outwards to encompass both the public and private spheres of employees, in an effort to close down dissent.

The use of ICT technologies to monitor, record and to survey employee's workload contribution has been well rehearsed. Employees' individual work outputs can be quickly assessed and converted into performance schemes, even for more abstract measurement of softer competencies or service related work. In such a way monitoring through computerisation not only fills in the porosity of the working day by restricting opportunities for personal 'down time' (rest, relaxation etc.) but also reduces discretion of the individual worker by removing context from the decision-making process. Reducing porosity in the working day can even be taken to include time allowed, or rather time not allowed, for normal bodily functions such as going to the toilet. Warehouse workers and fork lift drivers at Tesco, for example, have now been issued with radio-linked (RFID) arm band tags to monitor work rates and identify those staff spending too long in the toilet (*Independent,* 2013). In Ohio, a security firm has gone one step further and implanted RFID chips in two of its employees (*Financial Times*, 2006). This is not to say that employees do not find the ways and means to resist such enhanced control mechanisms, as Bain and Taylor (2000) have strikingly demonstrated in view of call centres.

The processes of electronic monitoring and control by HRM departments through appraisal, performance objectives and competencies may simply add to the (in)human panoptic effects

of workplace compliance and control. Notwithstanding the rather 'soft' nature of (human) resource management markers such as job evaluation, appraisal records and selection procedures, the subjugating power may be even more severe than harder output indicators constructed and enforced through the strict regulation of financial and production outputs (e.g. Townley 1993; 1999), by way of instilling a greater degree of identification and self-monitoring. Indeed, pure coercion and Taylorisation as forms of control are not the only ways in which compliance and consent may be manufactured in an organisation. As Burawoy (1979) suggested, employers may offer the 'illusion of choice' to employees as a subtle form of co-optation and might legitimise the more insidious side of the same technology that extends the forms for control and compliance. More probingly, Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer (2010), from a Lacanian psychoanalytical perspective, have turned conventional 'control and compliance' arguments somewhat on their head. They suggest that instead of being coercive and alienative forms of constructing subjectivity, such processes of target setting and organisational moulding of the employee hold out the promise to fulfil a sense of 'lack' in the individual. Here we see 'the role of fantasy in character formation' and how the discourse of the Other gives way to desire, 'as it shields the subject from the terror of living with a relentless sense of incompleteness' (Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer, 2010: 336). Even though soft HRM tools of control linked to information and communication technology may lack 'humanity', and engender alienation through processes of quantifying abstract labour, it might be the very process of observation, target setting and feedback which can create a consciousness of human worth and pleasure by reward in fulfilling the very objectives which oppress us.

However, for web 2.0 technologies enabling social media such as Facebook and Twitter we enter a new arena of struggle in which the insights expressed above become even more

apparent. Some employers, rather than fear the internal uncertainties of and threats from Web 2.0 technologies, have embraced the technology and sought to utilise it to create an organisational atmosphere where the related sense of lack is converted for the benefit of the organisation. Intranet-based social media (closed to the outside world) and cloud computing make possible a world of work-life communication, evermore enclosed within the organisation's own bubble. In such fashion the temptations of finding self-satisfaction by recording and distributing data about your own work progress is safely contained. Indeed, the fascination and self-satisfaction associated with recording personal information through data technology has now extended further with the development of the Quantified Self movement. This movement, also known as self-tracking or body-hacking, embraces limitless self-monitoring with the help of technologies that enable us to measure each and every aspect of our lives, be it sleep, health, sex, emotion, productivity, well-being or any other calculable activity. Such personal data is then recorded and shared with like-minded individuals on social networks often measured and mediated through smartphone applications.[ii] The implications for such self-tracking with its extended degree of personal data is potentially enormous, not least for employers who wish to monitor employee's attributes, misdemeanours and (in)efficiencies (Finley 2013). IBM, for example, now has a tool to identify 'unhappy' employees.[iii] A recent report by the *New Scientist* magazine reveals that 'Many companies – including BP, eBay and Buffer – already encourage employees to wear activity trackers like the Fitbit, often in exchange for discounts on health insurance' (Rutkin, 2014).

The imminent danger is that the virtual 'images' associated with social media are bought and sold as opposed to the 'physical embodiment of what they represent' in terms of value and labour, signalling a more radical phase of abstraction in the evolving dynamic of capital,

which we may construe as the 'commodification of culture' (Author B). It is not just the time and place of work that is eroding through the fleeting and flexible logic of networks, but labour itself is controllable by the further de-subjectification of competence and, in a Marxist interpretive sense, by subjugation through abstract standards (Marx, 1844). Thus employers may use individual tweets, self-tracking data and Facebook profiles as pre-screening before calling to an interview. However we may wish to construct our on-line identities, this enables employers' surveillance of employee indiscretions, recording the types and number of friends, and scanning photographs and 'likes' to build up a picture of social and political habits, gender, age, health and skin colour. A survey conducted in 2011 by the US Society for Human Resource Management found that 56 per cent of companies surveyed used social media scans before engaging in recruitment trawls, up from 34 per cent in 2008. A quarter of organisations explore social media profiles before offering jobs (Journalists Resource, 2013). The perniciousness and subjectivity of this process is plain to see. A further study in the US found, for example, that social media profiles which exhibited that an individual had a liking for alcohol consumption made them less likely to be offered a job than those whose profiles emphasised family orientations (Bohnert and Ross, 2009).

Of course, while employers use social media to their own advantage they are also aware of the threats it may pose to their authority and ability to control work-time. As an attack on so-called 'cyberloafing' employers have now moved *en masse* to ban social media on workplace computers. A survey conducted in the UK by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in 2010 reported that 79 per cent of the 1765 employer respondents have now banned social network sites on their computers (CIPD, 2011). In 2009, Portsmouth City banned its 4500 employees from using social network sites such as Facebook after finding that the staff logged on to the sites up to 270,000 times a month between them (on average

equivalent to three times a day!). The council says that staff can apply to have their accounts unblocked if they use them for work purposes. Such an exemption might include a fraud officer carrying out checks on claimants to ascertain that their lifestyles are what they claim they are. (*Mail* On-line 2009). Most trenchantly, the issue of employees engaged in service provision of both the private and public kind has focused attention on the narrowing gap between the corporate/state and public/private spheres. Bloggers now abound who work in the public service and blog regularly about the difficulties of their working life. The risks of them being found out and 'dooced' (sacked for alleged indiscretions on social media) by their employer have correspondingly increased (see Ellis and Richards, 2009) for a review).

Teachers and lecturers, for example, engaging with social media such as Facebook and Twitter face imminent disciplinary action. Argyll and Bute Council in Scotland has already banned its employed teachers from blogging about work after an incident when one head of department in a school blogged about three boys with Asperger's in her class. The case sits alongside other more high profile dismissals of bloggers or internet-based social networkers that have already occurred in the UK, with employees of Waterstone's bookstore, Argos retailers, the Prison Service, and Virgin Airways to name a few. Such 'inappropriate' use has usually involved alleged abusive remarks by employees directed at clients, customers, or service users. For teachers and lecturers the problem of separating the public from the private is particularly severe. A US based Sociology Professor, for example, perhaps naively, allowed 'friends of friends' to see her Facebook musings about students, leading to complaints from students. The Professor was suspended, and, as her University policy document correctly if not sympathetically stated, social media sites 'blur the lines between personal voice and institutional voice... Privacy does not exist in the world of social media.' (*USA Today*, 2012)

Virtual (Un)reality

Apart from the risks of invoking self-monitoring and counter-mobilisation, an additional limitation to the power of social media to enfranchise people may actually inhere in the 'virtual' nature of the medium itself. Rather than create 'hard' networks, fed by face-to-face trust and reciprocity, the virtual world relies on softer, more distanced communication. Indeed, a study of the Occupy and Tahrir Square movements would claim that social media is just one aspect of their underlying networking efforts rather than its core aspect, and perhaps less important in developing actual protest activity than instigating interpersonal contact (Fuchs, 2012: 788-790). There is also a potential limit on the amount of information activists can digest and process, and internet fatigue is apparent in a range of ways as identified by Lee (2006: 16).

The dangers of *slacktivism* and *clicktivism* are cited as examples whereby a false impression of activism is constructed in an optimistic portrayal of the power of social media to alter the course of history. In this critique, real time, real space activity is substituted by passive, virtual and physically isolating activity to the extent it is enacted through screen and keyboard interaction alone. Slacktivism is cited by Morozov (2009) as 'feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in "slacktivist" campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group'. Clicktivism, in parallel, might be defined as a 'model of activism which uncritically embraces the ideology of marketing. It accepts that the tactics of advertising and market research used to sell toilet paper can also build social movements. This manifests itself in an inordinate faith in the power of metrics to quantify success. Thus, everything digital activists do is meticulously monitored and analysed. The

obsession with tracking clicks turns digital activism into clicktivism' (White, 2010), in what could be described as a self-fulfilling actually techno-centric tendency, where indeed the medium and its inherent logic comes to occlude the message.

In sum, this journey through the literary landscapes of social media and workplace conflict has helped to crystallize the theoretical meaning associated with concepts like 'distributed discourse' and 'accelerated pluralism'. It has also prompted us to consider the possible limitations facing such empowering potentials for trade union activism, be it in terms of internal union decision-making, counter-mobilisation or by way of nurturing and co-opting self-monitoring proclivities. Shortly we will let these theoretical nuances fall upon the empirical accounts to better see how 'distributed discourse' and 'accelerated pluralism' may surface in a real life dispute and what this may say about the empowering potential of social media in workplace conflicts, but first a few practical words on the research process itself.

Research Process

As we are readying ourselves to touch ground with the 2010/2011 British Airways cabin crew dispute in the following section, let us commence landing by unpacking the more practical and methodological aspects of the research process here. In so doing, we move from the theoretical consideration of possibilities and limitations associated with social media and workplace conflict, to explore how concepts like 'distributed discourse' and 'accelerated pluralism' actually comes through at the empirical level. We thus aim to assess the workplace *battleground* by exploring significant ways in which social media use helped shape the discourses around the BA case study, as well as from secondary sources.

The individual narratives that frame such discourse and the counter-measures against the individuals themselves illustrate how online social media has become a central strategic instrument through which the dispute adversary may be targeted, whether from the top or from below. In conducting our case study we analyse primary data drawn from disciplinary cases within BA where social media as well as other interactive technologies of communication formed part of the disciplinary charge.

We also conducted interviews with six leading union representatives (BASSA), selected on account of having their central representative positions at BASSA/Unite and consequently being well-placed to appreciate the evolving dynamic of the conflict from the inside. Previous social media activity and engagement that had been surveyed was, however, not an election criteria. Although each of interviewee turned out to have extensive insight and experience of the various social media forums in which an increasingly important dimension of the conflict played itself out. All interviews were undertaken during the dispute itself as part of the research for a report written by one of the authors of this article (Author A, 2010).

The interviews were all semi-structured so as to enable a good balance of flexibility and foresight in terms of adapting to the particularities of each interviewee but yet keeping fairly well within an overarching line of inquiry. The significance of the text here, as in the data we obtained and transcribed through such process, is not simply taken at face value. However, by analysing what the most likely interpretations of its significance would be for the subject that announces it as well as appreciating its impact in light of wider documentary evidence, we have endeavoured to strengthen the validity of our content analysis (cf. Krippendorf, 1980). While there is no absolute guarantee in accurately representing the subjective truth behind

each statement, the more achievable task of reading them as the subjective estimations they are provides a testimony as to the significance of social media in the conflict.

Our documentary evidence was assembled from 80 individual disciplinary cases. These individual cases were gathered together from records provided to us by the trade union representing the employees in grievance and discipline cases conducted by management. They represent individual vignettes that together, we feel, present an accurate picture of the employer response to the use of web-based communication by union members during the dispute. We have also reviewed a wide range of relevant media use, in association with the conflict, to better examine the way the union and the employer used both traditional and new social media to pursue the dispute. This review took the form of content analysis of the key social media forums used by both supporters and opponents of the dispute (cf. Krippendorf, 1980).

We thus track a range of social media forums and record evidence from both 'sides' of the dispute. We draw conclusions from our analysis by appreciating the form and content of this communication as well as its impact on the dispute as it plays out, which hopefully add value to extant debates on power, 'distributed discourse' and 'accelerated pluralism' associated with the use of both Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 technologies.

We now turn to an examination of case study evidence. We focus on the contested nature of social media, ITC and WBC and refer to the examples of the 2010/2011 British Airways cabin crew dispute.

The British Airways Cabin Crew Dispute 2010/2011

The British Airways conflict essentially represented an attempt by BA management to break up union organisation and reclaim control over pay and working conditions. The control of work procedures and organisation of duties on the airplane has traditionally been undertaken by cabin service directors, many of whom were closely allied with the relatively autonomous cabin crews' union BASSA (British Airlines Stewards and Stewardesses Association), which is affiliated with Unite. When reporting for duty at the hub airport it is most often the case that individual cabin crews do not know each other. It is important, therefore to build a team that can work with and trust each other. Traditionally, the various duties and roles were allocated on a seniority basis by the cabin service director. In such fashion the 'way of doing things' was very much in the collective control of the staff. This practice co-existed with a system of relatively good pay and other conditions of service related to length of service and fiercely protected over the years by the union. BA's long term tinkering with 'organisational culture' had never really challenged this 'full service high quality' model of customer service (see Grugulis and Wilkinson, 2002, for a history up to year 2000. See Author A, for a more recent summary).

Cabin crew appeared rightly proud of this model and willing to defend the 'World's Favourite Airline'. The attack came from Chief Executive Willy Walsh, appointed from Aer Lingus in 2005 after having introduced his 'low cost' model in competition with Ryanair. In order to refocus BA on a lower cost model Walsh had not only to reduce pay and conditions and reduce staff on each flight but also challenge and if necessary break the workplace power of BASSA. His way forward was to attempt to introduce a 'new fleet' of employees, recruiting new young staff on lower pay and conditions as cabin crew with full management control over work duties. The system of long haul flight coverage, whereby cabin crew took

the whole journey before rest and recovery in overseas hotels, was to be abandoned in favour of short haul shifts with staff changeovers along route. Newly recruited staff could thus live near their work on an 'away and back home' basis. The seniority based home –to- work flight concessions for existing cabin crew recruited under the old system could consequently be abandoned. Such immense changes led to fierce resistance from BASSA, and a series of 22 strike days followed.

'Distributed discourse' and the union campaign?

Public opinion was courted by both sides as a major strategy. For management, the severity of the attack on the cabin crew meant that the union's authority had to be broken if the solidarity of the cabin crew was to be fractured. Courting the media would help that process. For the union, emphasising quality service on the flagship airline appeared an important lever to get public opinion and BA shareholders on their side to defend jobs, pay and conditions. In order to counter Willy Walsh's charm offensive to the media the full range of WBC was utilised by the union, at both official and unofficial levels. This may have been a particularly important initiative for two reasons.

First, cabin crew staff tended to be dispersed, not based on one particular workplace, often residing at some distance but residing within 'flying distance' of major airport hubs. It is worth noting that approximately ninety per cent of cabin crew staff at BA (as often elsewhere) are women, many of whom are married to pilots living distant from the airport hub. Indeed, social media proved instrumental in keeping up the tradition of trade union organising at BA, which meant that in spite of such dispersed conditions this group of women were nevertheless one of the most highly organised groups in the UK labour market. Social media networks and web-based information were used to overcome distance and structural

constraints in order to maintain rank-and-file accessibility in the continuous framing of the dispute discourse. In this sense, we can see a clear indication of 'distributed discourse' at work in facilitating the formation of the necessary bonds and social capital associated with continuously framing discourse through interactive communication (albeit online), given the extra difficulties of organising at face-to-face level (See Greene and Kirton, 2003, for a comparison).

Secondly, the social media networks established during the dispute enabled the union to maintain mobilising effects against 'the other', as highlighting the managerial practices at BA maintained the focus on the source of grievances on the dispute adversary, thereby in resonance with 'accelerated pluralism' overshadowing the barriers of internal differences. Let us thus take a closer look at how this emerging dynamic manifests itself in various ways over the course of the dispute.

Accelerated Pluralism against BA management?

Unite HQ campaigns department established a spoof website 'Brutish Airways' to highlight the bullying and harassment against its trade union activists as well as the media connections between BA management and Murdoch's newspapers.[iv] BASSA union officials deliberately reconstructed the corporate images and management discourse of British Airways management. For example, staff rosters for those on strike had been filled in by management as XXXX in the various columns, and the Four X symbol was used by BASSA in a conscious effort to create feelings of solidarity against management, one BASSA/Unite official said. Particular venom was directed at BA's in-house security operation Asset Protection, that according to another union representative, describing its activities as essentially about

'surveillance of our representatives and crew, so reminiscent of the Stasi in East Germany' (most of the staff at Asset Protection are ex-police officers).

YouTube videos were posted on the site featuring cabin crew staff arguing their case, and resulting in extensive interaction on the related discussion forums. An academic was invited to produce a report on the deteriorating industrial relations culture within the company.[v] Many cabin crew participated in the BASSA forum, a closed email discussion list, and some gained access to the parallel BALPA (British Airline Pilots Association) forum, which had been the source of a series of attacks against striking cabin crew often with class-based, gendered and homophobic content.

At a more unofficial level, a Facebook page was established in March 2010 called 'Support BA cabin crew's Democratic right to strike!' which drew in more than 3500 'likes/join'.[vi] The vast majority of posts on the site were supportive of the strikes, and the site regularly linked to press reports and most importantly, during strike days, fed full information of flight cancellations in an effort to counter the more customer 'appropriate' tone and content communicated by BA management. A small minority of postings were hostile to the strikes, and went alongside a separate Facebook group for BA anti-strike 'volunteers' established in May 2010. However, this particular site did not manage to 'take-off' and soon fell dormant with just ten 'likes'. What all these endeavours emphasize is the increased potential for 'accelerated pluralism' that inhere in social media, making visible the source of grievances and the discourses generated thereby.

Employer Counter-Mobilisation

BA management moved decisively against both BASSA and individual supporters of the strike in a series of disciplinary moves aimed at the use of Facebook, email networks and text messages. The strikes had begun to have a significant impact on BA's ability to operate, so much so that BA were forced to ask pilots to volunteer for cabin crew training to act as strike-breakers. As pilots were being recruited, BA counter-mobilised against BASSA over one weekend. More than 40 cabin crew were disciplined as a result of their support for the strikes and 15 were dismissed. 18 of the disciplinary cases were connected to Facebook postings, text messages, emails and postings on BASSA or BALPA forum, with 3 of the 18 specifically concerned with private Facebook postings to 'friends'.

The union suspected that Asset Protection had been involved in preparing these cases by gaining access to private postings in email, Facebook or text messaging records. The suspicions of the union were confirmed much later after the dispute when the national press reported on a payment from BA to Unite of £1m allegedly to 'hush up' details of the spying operation. (Independent, 27 February 2015). The payment by BA to the union was made as part of a process of compensation to the 'victims' on the basis that any individual settlements remained 'out of court'. Despite the bitterness of the strikes, and what could have been said in the 'heat of the moment', the majority of postings chosen for disciplinary action were mild in content. An example is a female cabin crew staff who asked on Facebook for a list of the pilots who had volunteered for training as strike-breakers. She was charged with bullying and harassment and breach of data protection policy and given a three-year final warning, demoted one grade, and barred from promotion. Another male cabin crew said he had a list of 'volunteer' pilots but did not know what to do with the list as 'he knew one of them personally'. He was dismissed.

A second male staff was dismissed after he used the word 'scab' in a text message sent in error to someone he thought was a friend. Pilots posting much more derogatory material against the strikers received no disciplinary action, or at maximum, mild rebuke. Much of the derogatory nature of the comments by pilots was highly gendered. An example is a male pilot and BALPA representative who posted on BALPA forum "F**k off BASSA you lying malevolent bunch of hypocritical self-serving c**ts". He received an informal verbal warning. Of most concern was that the disciplinary cases against cabin crew all involved charges of bullying and harassment. BA has a set procedure for dealing with such cases agreed with the trade unions which includes a process by which a third party is firstly involved to encourage mediation. Failing in bringing the case to a satisfactory conclusion a grievance procedure is then enacted which includes processes of investigation by managers (up to two).

However, in all the cabin crew cases the BA procedure was ignored by management, who moved straight to disciplinary action up to and including dismissal. Nevertheless it was clear that all of those dismissed were known to be active strikers and these included a female cabin crew member and BASSA representative who was sacked for 'gross misconduct' for the 'way she represented' each of those members disciplined. In particular, the union representative had questioned the fact that the BA disciplinary and grievance procedures previously agreed with the union appeared to have been by-passed and ignored. Instead, the representative claimed, an alternative set of procedures (known as the 'Leiden' procedures) had been unilaterally constructed and applied by management to the detriment of the union and its members.

Reflecting on the impact of web based communication during the strikes, a BASSA/Unite official valued the use of social media and stressing the importance of the 'Brutish Airways' website, as means of building solidarity. The *content* of the material placed on the web was aimed specifically to construct 'counter-symbols' to the prevailing BA management discourse imbued with ideological attacks against the union.

As far as 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism' is concerned, there is little in terms of direct evidence for such tendencies in our empirical accounts. It is clear that a lot of union members were much more vocal and outspoken in the online discussion forums, as most representatives testify, than were the case in the traditional face-to-face meetings and campaigns. This may of course support the general tendency of 'distributed discourse', discussed above, and the potential slacktivist and/or clicktivist propensity arguably to some extent intrinsic to asserting that the medium itself brings out actions that wouldn't otherwise surface. However, the fact that we could see these separate arenas of struggle in the BA dispute converging and complimenting rather than occluding one another should suggest that the BASSA/Unite campaign managed to mitigate the risk of slacktivism and clicktivism by integrating online discourse generation with face-to-face encounters.

Indeed, solidarity was maintained throughout the dispute in a series of mass meetings close to Heathrow, and in the five separate strike ballots the vote for strike action was always greater than 80 per cent. The dispute ran its course and as might be expected towards the end of the dispute some dissent was shown by rank-and-file members at Unite's reluctance to engage solidarity from other airport workers and the leadership's eventual willingness to reach a deal with BA management.

BA management succeeded in introducing a New Fleet on lower pay and conditions within the airline, but the union campaign was also successful in isolating the New Fleet from the rest of the cabin crew (now renamed by BA as the 'legacy fleet'), by blocking the two sets of fleet staffs working on the same flight and preserving full basic and variable pay for staff recruited under the old contract. Most importantly, the organisation of BASSA held together, and the union still has 9500 members. New Fleet staff is now being recruited directly into Unite (rather than BASSA), and of the 1200 new staff 740 have joined the union. They have no recognition rights, but the aim of the union is to build up their organisation and make positive links with BASSA.

Discussion

Our case study highlights some of the most salient contradictions, tensions and complexities around social media and workplace conflict. In this view, we discern a powerful linkage between social media networking and mobilisation theory, whereby feelings of togetherness against the employer may be consolidated. For the striking cabin crew the use of social media had a binding effect as a virtual social network in consolidating collective identity, and as a powerful additional tool in disseminating information to evoke social cohesion in contradistinction to the employer. At the same time we have seen evidence of how this very same transparency and distribution of access conveyed by social media may serve to counter-act and pre-empt these developments in the shaping of workplace discourse, by equally enabling employer's to utilize it as a sophisticated tool of compliance and control. We even go as far as to articulate some of these dangers as pertaining to a developing commodification of culture that seems to transpire through new and elaborate ways of measuring abstract labour, albeit in part facilitated by self-monitoring. The social relationships that we set out to

investigate in light of these emerging technologies and their impacts are therefore increasingly complex, and becomes even more so with each new technological advance.

Most importantly, and despite the optimistic prospects that the internet afforded for union renewal (e.g. Shostak, 1999; Freeman and Rogers, 2002), we must be aware of employers' ability to both constrain union use of the internet and ICT in all its forms by legislative or coercive means. In such fashion the threat 'from below' is de-activated and prospects for 'distributed discourse' (Greene *et al*, 2003) or accelerated pluralism' (Bimber, 1998) are dimmed. Indeed employers have the wherewithal and the motivation both to enhance their own efforts to bind and commit employees to the goals and objectives of the organisation through the use of both Web 1.0 and web 2.0 technologies, and to counter-mobilise against the potential liberating effects that social media in particular may have on discourse and power within the organisation.

In our case study we saw BA management counter-mobilising in full offensive against its employees' use of Facebook, Twitter and text messaging as it sought to break the union stranglehold on staff loyalty. This was indeed an intense operation by BA, using its full power to dismiss without recourse to agreed procedures. Nevertheless social media, web based communication and the use of collective text messaging (SMS), clearly made a contribution in disseminating information about the dispute and putting out calls for real time meetings to a dispersed workforce that was relatively isolated from each other. It also highlighted the potential of a synoptic effect, whereby the panoptic power of top-down surveillance of the multitude could be at least partially reversed (cf. Foucault, 1995; Bentham, 2008). This enabled employees to shine the focus of discontent on alleged management bullying and harassment in pursuit of 'their' side of the dispute. In this respect

the use of the available technologies appears to confirm both the distributive power of social media in the Foucauldian sense, as much as the mobilising effects whereby the source of grievance can be isolated to encourage action, by stimulating the imperative sense of 'them and us' (as in Kelly and Kelly, 1994). As such the prospects for 'accelerated pluralism' could be enhanced albeit through the creation of collective identity and subsequent mobilisation against the 'other'.

As far as collective action is concerned, we must also remember that trade unions as agents of collective workplace power, depend on traditional and sometimes bureaucratized structures of decision-making that may be at odds with the more dispersed and open dynamic of social media. In other words, meetings, voting and power hierarchies in their modus operandi, may by their very nature conflict with and/or restrain the potential of social media to distribute discourse (cf. Greene et al. 2003; Greene and Kirton, 2003). This is not to say that the use of social media within unions is anti-democratic, but rather to suggest that to achieve its full liberating potential for rank-and-file union members social media may need to be used as a complement rather than as a substitute for more traditional forms of communication and decision-making. For example, in view of our case study there appeared to be a salient congruence between the union leadership and rank-and-file during the bulk passage of the dispute, with BASSA preserving its close-knit independence until the tail end of the dispute, when the Unite union leadership held sway against further militancy. As such, the case for 'distributed discourse' as a rank-and-file tool to challenge the power and authority within the trade union itself, remains contestable.

Conclusion

We have sought to assess the realities of the contested nature of social media and other forms of web based communication in the workplace. Our theoretical overview highlights an optimistic view of the prospects for trade union revitalisation through the use of internet and in particular social media. Most prevalent is a Foucauldian reliance on 'distributed discourse' and the associated phenomenon of 'accelerated pluralism' (cf. Greene et al. 2003; Bimber, 1998), which has given rise to some cause for 'optimism' around the potential of social media in empowering trade unions. In particular, we have seen evidence of social media use overcoming dispersed conditions to mobilise employees collectively against the employer by rendering more enduring and interactive the distinct sense of 'them and us'.

Moreover, if we are to avoid the mentioned simulacra of clicktivism and slacktivism, where everything seems to happen except the event itself, we need to reaffirm the importance of not letting social media eclipse more outright and conventional forms of mobilizing social movements. In the British Airways dispute, traditional mass meetings were an important part of the campaign, as was the long-developed sense of solidarity and subsequent grievance among the cabin crew, and without the latter the effects of social media would have been close to none. Social media and collective text messaging oiled the machine of union mobilisation, rather than built the machine.

In summary we discern social media in the workplace as a highly contested field in which managerial counter-mobilisation may overcome potentially liberating powers on part of the employees by using the very same technologies as instruments of control and surveillance. This is not to say that social media and other forms of web-based communication might not

possess such potential, but to suggest that its potential remains largely grounded in the everyday struggle of workplace power relationships.

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[i] For a review of the various initiatives see http://www.arthurshostak.com/index.php/essays/33-edging-toward-cyberunionism-retrospect-salute-and-forecast.html
[ii] See, for example, http://quantifiedself.com/ .
[iii] See Phoebe Moore-Carter's blog on the subject at http://phoebevmoore.wordpress.com/2013/07/28/self-tracking-and-the-quantified-man/
[iv] https://www.unitetheunion.org/pdf/027-BA%20Brutish-Airways.pdf (please note, this site has since been discontinued)
[v] See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34265WFtiL4 and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lVeIMFlvn0I
[vi] http://www.facebook.com/pages/Support-BA-Cabin-Crews-Democratic-right-to-strike/368528654694?ref=ts&fref=ts