E-Voice: Information Technology and Unions

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New technologies have become both a means and an end. They are a means of communication linking individuals and organizations throughout the world. Serving as a medium through which electronic messages are sent, they allow rapid diffusion with few barriers to entry except for the cost of (increasingly inexpensive) hardware and an Internet connection. The Internet in particular has permeated the way companies do business and display their wares, the way consumers shop on-line, and even the way romances are struck through chat rooms. It has penetrated our daily lives and become in only a single generation a taken-for-granted element in daily living. Teens and even children operate the Internet as though they are the center of a great octopus of live connections reaching out to the information they want, the community of people with whom they develop links, and a great many resources that parents would rather they not access. The Internet is also an end: Websites are carefully crafted to draw the eye, open the pocketbook, foster loyalty, and be bookmarked as favorite sites. New technologies have insinuated themselves into our lives at an astonishing pace, but industrial relations academics have not had many years to reflect on how this movement affects important processes within our field.

The opening two papers in our symposium capture the insights of union insiders, Pizzigati, Yentzer, and Henderson of the National Education Association, and Lucore of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. In frank discussions, the authors assess their unions' experiences with new technologies.

Initially, computerization led to efficiencies in administrative tasks, such as word processing, and designing communications devices, such as leaflets. It increased the ability of union staff to access each other and exchange information. Membership records could be consolidated and updated more easily. With e-mail and the Internet came a huge upsurge in the capacity of unions to communicate with members and keep in touch with local affiliates. Then as technology evolved, the idea of creating a union hub, an Internet site to attract hits from members and potential activists, became paramount. Internet designers created attractive and compelling websites. One of the main insights from the Pizzigati et al. study is that some unions become enamored by the Internet's vast potential but erred initially in treating it as an end product, hoping that "if we build it, they will come." Members didn't come, or to be more precise, they did but not more than a few times, and certainly not enough to justify the expenditures on

the Internet. To treat the union website as passive and put the onus on members to actively seek it out was the incorrect approach. Years of subsequent learning reveals that the Internet is most effective when it is used as an active channel of communication, when the union uses it to reach out to members with customized messages based on members' interests and demographic clusterings. Readers should be fascinated at the historic progression and the cogent examples offered by these authors about the role of unions in the complex and competitive information age.

As we catch our breath over the rapidity of technological change even within unions, it is helpful to offer empirical findings about the Internet world. Greer presents an in-depth examination of major union websites, supplemented by a content analysis of 64 union websites. Further insights are gleaned from interviews with unions' information technology professionals. Greer finds that political activism and collective bargaining functions are widely posted on websites, but unions make less use of the web to solicit input from members or establish greater two-way communication. Despite the potential of the Internet, unions predominantly use their institutions' main websites merely to disseminate information in a one-way flow.

The symposium then concludes with a debate on the effectiveness of the new technologies for unions based on two final papers with very different conclusions. Shostak argues that labor's best hope for resurgence rests within a group of cyber-savvy unions that make full use of the new technologies to revitalize organizing, servicing, and political action functions. Written in the "jolts" style of the new "digerati," Shostak clearly acknowledges the segmentation that exists among unions based on their use of new technologies. Cyber Naught unions offer only flat and uninspired messages on the Internet and have little attraction to technology breakthroughs. Cyber Drift unions may have high hopes, but their implementation of technology leads to frustration and crippling infrastructure problems. Shostak hopes that another wave of change that emphasizes the transactional potential of new technologies will offer those unions that adopt it a tremendous life-giving infusion. By contrast, Chaison is unconvinced that harnessing the new technologies will create an appreciable turn-around in labor's fortunes. Indeed, he worries that the attention to technology is diversionary and that scarce organizing resources will be siphoned off for various technology boondoggles. Unions were not an early entrant into Internet technologies, and unions have no particular competitive advantage, nor are there any barriers to entry that would preserve union marketing efforts.

Assessing how information technology and the Internet affect unions is not an easy task. Consider the following: Last year Taras needed to speak to the president of a large union whose staff was represented by a different union. She called his office and was informed by a voice messaging system that the support staff was engaged in a lawful strike and would not be operating his office. She then located his personal e-mail address and sent him a message on some mundane matter or other, e.g., would he speak to her university class? It struck her afterwards: Had she inadvertently used the new technology to cross an electronic picket line? We are still at a very exploratory stage, and through these five articles we seek some empirical grounding in assessing those new developments that clearly engender lively debate and highly speculative approaches.

The new technologies are accessible to many different constituencies – unions, employers, labor boards, courts and tribunals, and the rank and file – with few barriers to use. Taras belongs to a faculty union, and there also is a large support-staff union on her campus. All these constituents are connected via a computer intranet system provided by the university. The last two rounds of bargaining for the support staff in particular were acrimonious, and what was most unusual was the extent to which the union members used the intranet to blast the union, and the vitriol appearing on the computer screens put the union on the defensive. The rank and file can now communicate with each other directly without the union as an intermediary. The very accessibility of the intranet to union members is a double-edged sword for unions: While it allows unions direct and unfiltered communication to members to build solidarity, it also empowers dissident factions to make ratification of the recommendations of bargaining committees difficult and to challenge the activities of union officials. In the electronic age, union democracy does not necessarily mean that life is easier for unions (Finnamore, 2000), and we see this finding also in some of the symposium articles. While unions such as the United Food and Commercial Workers can use the Internet to promote collective bargaining in campaigns to win Wal-Mart or Borders employees, the Internet can also be turned against union organizing by corporations wishing to campaign directly with employees, and even by union members wishing to challenge union officials and reform union processes, e.g., <www.heretics.net>, <www.cupewatch.org>, <www.ufcw.net>, and <www.reapinc.org>. Some North American companies are using a low-cost "Investigator" surveillance program that records computer activity by employees and scans for keywords such as "union" or "boss," pinpointing potential union organizing hot-spots (Teel, 2000). The Internet also provides a clearinghouse for labor market information of interest to workers, including job postings. The technology is only a proxy: It is as active or passive, good or evil, as those who use it.

But doesn't the technology itself have its own dynamics? With the lure of the computer often both at home and at work, members are much more tempted to drop a line of encouragement or criticism to their own unions than in the past. E-mail is much easier than writing and posting a formal letter or making a face-to-face appointment. But now the barricades have fallen, and there is a new permeability between individuals and their institutions. E-mail has a more informal, chatty, cavalier feel to it than past communication methods. Multiple levels of hierarchy can be skirted by sending messages directly to top officials rather than following a traditional chain of command. Why bother with shop stewards when members can take their problems or praise directly to the top? Unions are inundated with messages from their constituents, and managing the information flow is a challenge. Similarly, union members are bombarded by messages from marketers, friends, coworkers, politicians, charities, and so many social causes — the union's message can so easily be lost among all the competing calls for attention. Some unions with high hopes that all it takes to mobilize workers is an attractive website will be lost in the dust, while others will develop more effective uses of the new technology. Shostak believes that union resurgence will arise from these latter techno-savvy unions. Meanwhile, Chaison reminds us that monitoring and adapt-

ing technologies is an expensive and time-consuming task: In expending their resources on technology, unions must not assume that the Internet is a substitute for action. Rather, the Internet merely complements traditional union activities, and there is little reason to expect unions to be able to ride this new technology to victory. Information technology is not a philosopher's stone capable of transmuting base metals to gold.

There are generational issues here as well. Professors who ask students to access websites for their research and for class discussion are often surprised by how young students harshly criticize websites that the professors regard as satisfactory. The students say that the linkages are not easy to follow, that the visual imagery is outdated and embarrassing, and that the contents are less than compelling. The standard is high among technology consumers, and there is little tolerance for poor craftsmanship. In order to capture the potential of new technologies, unions (never known for being at the forefront of information technology) are required to measure up to the highest standards of Internet design. We suspect that unions will not gain much by adopting the new technologies, but rather, that they will lose a great deal by failing to adopt them. New workers will expect readily accessible and relevant information in electronic form. Unions are being asked to make a rapid transition from the industrial age to the information age just to keep up with the marketplace of ideas. The consequences to unions, beneficial and otherwise, form the core of this dynamic symposium on e-voice and unions.

REFERENCES

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