

# Towards unions 2.0: rethinking the audience of social media engagement

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*This paper aims to examine how trade union members perceive opportunities for online engagement and what the differences are between traditional and online audiences. The empirical work is based on a survey of members of a Greek union in the banking sector. The findings outline the characteristics of an audience that is likely to support information sharing and networking activities on the web. For this audience, traditional levels of loyalty and union participation were not strongly related with perceptions about the union's online presence. Instead, Internet skills and experiences had a dominant effect. The implications of this study suggest that trade unions have to actively seek knowledge about the characteristics of their new audience and adapt communications strategies accordingly.*

**Keywords:** Web 2.0, social media, social networks, online engagement, e-Participation, trade union communications, trade union democracy, Greek trade unions.

## Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are becoming increasingly relevant for trades unions. The discussion over ICTs and union modernisation encompasses a number of topics such as new communication strategies (Lucio, 2003), transnational networking (Lucio *et al.*, 2009; Pulignano, 2009), labour organising (Lucio and Walker, 2005; Hogan *et al.*, 2010) and online protesting and campaigning (Blodgett and Tapia, 2010; Muir, 2010).

More recently, Web 2.0 tools or social media seem to be promoted by key international initiatives such as the one organised by UNI Global Union (2011), which is actively supported through the dedicated communicators' network (McGrath *et al.*, 2012). Those tools involve the use of networking and information sharing applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube to engage with union members and the

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wider public. Interest in their adoption has even motivated the working term *Unions 2.0*, which merges traditional unionism with Web 2.0 (e.g. Bibby, 2008).

Can social media indeed support the interactions of unions with their members and the public? Until a few years ago, maintaining an organisational profile on a website such as Facebook would have seemed inconsistent with the usually perceived leisure nature of social networks. Now, it is widely accepted that social media create noteworthy opportunities for engagement (e.g. Chadwick, 2009; Meijer and Thaens, 2010; Waters *et al.*, 2009). As a result, there is need for empirical research to examine how union members perceive the concept of online engagement and how unions can act upon those perceptions.

This paper reflects on the findings of a survey of members of a Greek union in the banking sector. The aim of this survey was to investigate the adoption of social networking among members and diagnose the potential for an online engagement strategy. The survey findings provide support to such efforts because they indicate the existence of an audience who anticipates strong benefits from the union's online presence and seems willing to engage even outside working hours. The findings also suggest that traditional levels of loyalty and union participation are not strongly related with willingness to participate online. Instead, perceptions about the union's online presence are highly affected by Internet experiences and skills.

Therefore, the paper makes the case that online forms of communication might require reconsiderations with regard to audiences, structures and means of engagement. Unions should be prepared to actively seek knowledge about the characteristics of their new audience and develop appropriate engagement strategies. Before presenting the survey and elaborating on its findings, the next two sections introduce social media engagement and then discuss it line with current work on ICTs and trade unions.

## Social media engagement

The Web 2.0 and social media terms do not simply group Internet tools such as social networks, blogs, videoconferencing, content sharing, streaming and RSS feeds. Those terms further denote a cultural phenomenon evolving around mass collaboration, user participation and social interaction (Kim *et al.*, 2009). Compared with traditional media, even users with limited technical knowledge can easily become both producers and consumers of social media content.

The relevance of social media engagement opportunities has been widely explored. Research with commercial organisations has focused on both internal and external business uses of social media (McAfee, 2006; Seo and Rietsema, 2010). One such example is the case of Starbucks where social media were used to learn from and listen to customers (Gallaughar and Ransbotham, 2010). In the public sector, it has been argued that authorities can use social media to foster citizen participation, increase transparency and engage with diverse types of stakeholders (Chadwick, 2009; Bertot *et al.*, 2010; Waters and Williams, 2011). Following the 2008 USA Presidential elections, social media have also been widely seen as mechanisms of political communication (Wattal *et al.*, 2010).

Although opportunities for online engagement appear promising, certain qualifications can be seen to apply. At first, engagement cannot be ensured by simply adopting several tools without developing suitable propositions that can be tailored into specific needs and audiences. For example, Waters *et al.* (2009) analysed the Facebook profiles of 275 non-profit organisations to conclude that social media presence should involve planning, expertise and resource allocation, especially if the objective is to attract participation.

Furthermore, social media requires reconceptualising traditional audiences and spaces of engagement (e.g. Kidd, 2011). The enhanced ability to collaborate and contribute on social media leads to the notion of an 'active audience', which seems to be an essential extension of opportunities for spontaneous content generation (Harrison and Barthel, 2009). Even if this new audience might be more receptive and eager to partici-

pate, its relationship with those traditionally engaged through offline means can be ambivalent. This is because, in addition to issues of digital exclusion, there seems to be a major difference in how users and non-users of the Internet perceive online activities. On the basis of their previous experiences, Internet users are much more likely to trust spaces, people and information online than non-users (Dutton and Shepherd, 2006). Studies have shown that experienced Internet users who participate in online political activities might not be necessarily motivated or interested in traditional politics (Krueger, 2002; Gibson *et al.*, 2005; Borge and Cardenal, 2011).

The fact that Internet use can have a direct effect on participation beyond existing patterns and motivation is positive in terms of reaching online audiences even if hitherto they have been disengaged. This opportunity calls for better understanding the connection between traditional and online traditional trade union networks.

## Online labour organising and social media

Trade unions are by their nature collective organisations of workers where dialogue should ideally combine top-down (strong leadership) with bottom-up structures representative of the union's diversity (Hyman, 2007). Union leaders have been advised to explore all possible opportunities to communicate with their members and listen to their concerns as an issue of survival due to changing labour and socio-economic conditions (Carter *et al.*, 2003). The agenda of trade union modernisation thought ICTs ranges from improving member services and supporting industrial actions to examining whether interactive forms of communication can coexist with current practices of union democracy.

The belief that ICTs can enhance union democracy and accountability to members was expressed before the emergence of social media with tools such as websites, mailing lists, chat rooms and forums (Diamond and Freeman, 2002). Greene *et al.* (2003) illustrate the potential of ICTs for union democracy in critical issues such as transparency over means of communication, overcoming physical requirements of membership participation and extending solidarity across boundaries. Carter *et al.* (2003) discuss the concept of a polyphonic union enabled by ICTs. Other authors emphasise how online communications facilitate more responsive forms of global union organising which bypass traditional constraints of time and space (Lucio *et al.*, 2009; Pulignano, 2009; Whittall *et al.*, 2009; Hogan *et al.*, 2010).

Notwithstanding the promise of ICTs, their implementation within current organisational and political structures cannot be taken for granted. Lucio (2003) positions online communication strategies within union history and politics. Along broader issues of communicative traditions, identity, culture and ideology, ICTs in unions have to be associated with generational, social and organisational change. For example, Lucio and Walker (2005) note that ICTs usually come from communication departments led by younger individuals who have not followed conventional union career paths. Effectively, Internet tools have to be examined with respect to the new organisational forms that they enable; those forms are unlikely to be based on top-down communications in union bureaucracies (Lucio *et al.*, 2009).

Positioning the concept of social media engagement in this debate cannot be limited to the practical use of networking and information sharing tools. Instead, social media engagement has to be approached within its social and cultural transformation context. At first, it is important to consider that social networks are membership-based communities *themselves* whose inherent attributes attracted and actively engaged millions of users in remarkably short times (Bryson *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, social media calls for rethinking the audience and engagement context within the traditions, capacities and structures of unions. So far, ICTs have been thought of as an opportunity to become more inclusive in terms of attracting new members (Diamond and Freeman, 2002) and increasing interactions with groups that might be under-represented or marginalised (Greene and Kirton, 2003; Matsaganis, 2007; Bibby, 2008). Those groups usually include younger, part-time or disabled workers; Greene and Kirton (2003) characterise them as 'atypical' members.

In addition to approaching atypical members, social media can be related to extending the influence of unions beyond workspace boundaries. ICTs have usually been associated with workplace surveillance and Internet monitoring (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Stoney Alder *et al.*, 2006; Ball, 2010; Ball and Margulis, 2011). However, they now seem to be able to offer more positive effects within and possibly outside working hours, especially given the fact that virtual workplaces already surpass conventional boundaries of space and time (Fineman *et al.*, 2007).

Regardless of the benefits, social media use is in many cases either discouraged by employees or openly considered unacceptable (Bibby, 2008). For example, the fear of online exposure has resulted in specialised social networks for unionists such as the UnionBook organised by LabourStart (2011). The reaction of workers to opportunities for engagement can be very much affected by specific conditions in workplaces, organisations or even industries. A US study found that union members are more intense users of ICT at work than non-unionised employees (Masters *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, about a third of unionised employees were found to be high-intensity ICT users. In line with studies emphasising the dominance of Internet skills, it is likely that online engagement strategies have to look more carefully at the specific audience characteristics and identify their expectations for online communications.

Therefore, social media engagement calls for examining how union members perceive potential new ways of interacting and how unions should approach the use of social media in the workplace and beyond. The empirical work presented in this paper focuses on the following questions:

Are union members supportive of social media engagement and how are their expectations affected by individual characteristics, Internet experiences and offline engagement variables?

Can online engagement attract new audiences in unionism and contribute to reconnecting with atypical members, especially the young?

The next section introduces the research approach of this study in the form of an exploratory survey conducted with the members of a Greek union in the banking sector.

## Research approach

Greek trade unions have developed a long tradition of dynamic industrial actions, and their decision-making processes are usually centralised. Communication with members occurs mainly through personal contacts and printed material such as leaflets. Elected leaders are considered experts in their field with a duty to define the union's agenda. Particularly from 2009, following the period of austerity in the Greek society, trade unions have faced very challenging circumstances and are hardly able to defend wages and working conditions. Many current and former union officials are criticised about their affiliations with political parties. In this environment, leaders have been confronting pressures by members to become more open and transparent. Finding ways to regain their trust seems to constitute a matter of survival for many of them. Furthermore, Greek unions have specific problems approaching younger employees, and their membership composition seems to be biased by factors such as gender, sector, age and ethnicity (Matsaganis, 2007).

Since 1955, unions from each bank have formed a federation that is responsible for negotiating collective agreements with employers. Those agreements are then adapted by the individual unions, which also deal with members' everyday work issues. The adoption of ICTs in the sector has been limited to basic websites with the use of social media being sporadic and led mostly by several key individuals.

Although leaders do recognise that online communications might be different from current practices, since spring 2009, the federation has started an ongoing initiative to operationalise new media and improve communications in the sector. Thoughts to consider online engagement tools followed the increasing use of social networking and

blogging applications in the Greek society as well as the rise in broadband adoption. A series of pilot activities have been organised under this initiative, which include videoconferencing, social networking groups and the development of training material. As the threat of membership loss is not that direct in the sector, the initiative has focused on increasing membership engagement and promoting more effectively the federation's positions. In particular, online communications are believed to be a means for targeting the young, who seem quite unwilling to engage with unions, even if they are registered with them. A further motivation comes from the country's complicated geography and the need to connect more regularly with small groups of members who are based on remote communities such as islands. More information about the activities and course of this initiative can be found in Panagiotopoulos (2012).

The exploratory survey reported in this study was organised in January 2011 with one of the unions forming the federation as part of the broader initiative to improve communications. The specific objective was to obtain feedback about the potential of online communications and consider an engagement strategy that would take into account members' expectations. The survey was also expected to uncover useful lessons for other unions in the sector and the country.

The union selected is led by a team of young officials and represents about 40 per cent of a total of 3,000 employees in a medium-sized commercial bank. Since 2008, the leadership team had recognised the potential of web technologies by developing a website and considering further steps. Apart from its adequate web experience, this organisation was selected because it possessed the infrastructure to disseminate a web survey (mailing lists and organised website). Also, its members were estimated to form an audience interested in such a pilot study (e.g. young, high Internet adoption).

Within working hours, about half of the union members have access only to the union's website and the rest have from minor to severe Internet restrictions. This has two important consequences: external content through the union website is not accessible for most members from the workplace and many bank employees have no other online sources of information during working hours. This gives the union's website a dedicated audience who can be the starting point for further engagement activities.

### Survey development and administration

The background frames the main questions upon which the survey was based (see Appendix). Questions started with demographic information (age, gender, education and years of union membership) and an evaluation of the union's website (e.g. content, ease of use, reliability), frequency and time of visit. Then, respondents were asked about their Internet access, Internet skills and adoption of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. Intensity of Facebook use was also measured using a construct adapted from previous studies (Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Valenzuela *et al.*, 2009). Intensity of use for the other online social networks was not measured because their adoption was expected to be considerably lower than Facebook. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn were the four tools selected because their adoption was estimated to be higher compared with others such as Second Life and Flickr.

Respondents were asked to assess: (1) their trust in the union's mission [union loyalty (UL)]; (2) their perception of the usefulness of unions in their working life [union instrumentality (UI)]; and (3) their willingness to participate in union activities (WP). Those three variables measuring offline attitudes were adapted from studies in Industrial Relations, mainly the one by Metochi (2002), where they were tested in a study with Cypriot unions (a context similar to the Greek). Following their offline attitudes, respondents indicated their willingness to communicate with the union exclusively within or also outside working hours (variable Com), without specifying whether it concerns online or offline communications.

Finally, respondents were asked about potential benefits from the union's online presence. To measure those attitudes, they had to specify the extent to which they agree with the following statements (on five-point Likert scales), which were combined in a

construct named online presence (OP): 'I believe that the union can benefit from its presence on social networks'(OP-SN), 'I believe that the union can benefit from the Internet compared to its traditional activities' (OP-WEB) and 'I believe that the union can benefit from its presence on Facebook' (OP-FB).

The questionnaire was constructed in the Survey Monkey hosting system and opened for responses for a period of two weeks. An email invitation was sent to all bank employees followed by a weekly reminder. No incentives were offered apart from assurance that substantial participation could assist the union to effectively reconsider its communication strategy, following Archer's (2007) advice on the importance of convincing respondents about the questionnaire's benefit in order to increase response rates.

The invitation was sent to all bank employees because many of them, although not officially registered as members, participate in the union's social activities and regularly visit its website. The survey was started by 398 visitors, but due to technical restrictions by the bank's network, a number of them were unable to finish (some returned and completed from a home computer). The study results are based on 229 complete responses. Although it is not possible to know exactly how many invitations were delivered, the estimated response rate is about 18–20 per cent for members with completed questionnaires and 15 per cent for those who started the questionnaire in total (about 75 per cent of respondents were registered members). The response rate was affected by technical difficulties with the bank's network, possibly undelivered invitations and the lack of tangible incentives for completion.

The choice of a web survey was an important decision for this study. Although it was expected to result in a relatively low response rate (15–20 per cent), this does not necessarily suggest bias (Evans and Mathur, 2005; Shin *et al.*, 2012). Web surveys are not always representative of the whole population (Best *et al.*, 2001) but are likely to generate results of higher data quality, especially when respondents have a personal interest to participate (Barrios *et al.*, 2011). In this study, there was a clear focus to investigate the characteristics of members who are Internet users and potentially interested to engage in online activities. Those members were *a priori* not hypothesised to be representative of the whole membership base. Hence, the choice of a web survey as a form of online engagement itself suited well the objective to identify the relevant audience among union members and examine its characteristics. Respectively, a choice of paper-based or mixed methods would not had yield the same targeted sample, even if it improved the internal validity of the study in terms of response rate.

In fact, the survey demographics revealed an interesting characteristic. Although most control variables were representative of the bank's average statistics (membership years, age and education), the survey was slightly weighted in favour of men (about 65 per cent instead of about 50 per cent). Studies have shown that online participation in political activities is likely to be biased towards young educated males (e.g. Anduiza *et al.*, 2009). It was also evident that the survey attracted younger (77.3 per cent less than 35 years old) and single people (52.4 per cent). However, those two figures do correspond with the population's average age and estimations of marital status.

### Survey findings

The survey drew the attention of members with different experiences in the union life: 5 per cent were members for less than a year, 11 per cent from 1 to 2 years, 34.5 per cent from 3 to 4, 27 per cent from 5 to 6 and 7 per cent since the union foundation seven years before. Questionnaire respondents had an 86 per cent home broadband adoption, which exceeds the approximately 40 per cent national and 60 per cent European average (Gartner, 2011). This can probably be attributed to the fact that bank employees are a young audience with sufficient financial status to afford it.

The adoption of social networks by the union audience revealed some clear tendencies. Facebook was used by about 75 per cent of respondents, while Twitter and LinkedIn by 13 per cent and 12 per cent, respectively. Interestingly, 76 per cent were not

Table 1: Significant differences for communicating within and outside working hours ( $p < 0.01$ )

Variable	Preferred communication	Mean	Standard deviation	<i>t</i> value	d.f.
UL	Work only	3.71	0.66	-2.84	169
	Also personal	4.02	0.68		
UI	Work only	3.95	0.75	-3.94	218
	Also personal	4.31	0.60		
WP	Work only	2.50	0.78	-5.17	216
	Also personal	3.12	0.89		
OP	Work only	3.51	0.57	-4.0	211
	Also personal	4.84	0.60		

UL; union loyalty; UI, union instrumentality; OP, online presence.

even aware of LinkedIn, whereas 78 per cent were aware of Twitter even though they did not maintain a profile. One out of four responded that they visit YouTube less than once a week, and the rest were more regular visitors. *T*-tests between users and non-users of those four networks indicated higher Internet skills for users ( $p < 0.05$ ) and that those who had accounts on Twitter and LinkedIn were better educated ( $p < 0.05$ ). There were no significant age differences between users and non-users, only between more and less frequent YouTube visitors.

The results from the union website evaluation were quite positive (mean 3.5/5, standard deviation 0.83) and really interesting with regard to the observed diversity on when and from where visits to the website occur. From aggregating the seven options offered (e.g. once a month, 2–3 times per week), it seems that 30 per cent visit the website at least once a day, 63 per cent at least once a week and the rest at least 2–3 times per year. Only 5 per cent visit the website only within their personal time, 18 per cent do so usually mostly in their private time, 27.5 per cent usually during their working hours and 45 per cent exclusively during their working hours.

A key finding of this survey is the fact that a majority of 63 per cent expressed interest to engage with the union outside working hours. Table 1 illustrates the descriptives, and *t*-test results for those who are willing or not to communicate outside working hours only for the variables found to have significant differences (all for  $p < 0.01$ ). No differences were found in terms of gender, age, marital status, education, Internet skills and intensity of Facebook use. Beyond statistical significance, the difference seems to be meaningful mainly for WP and perceived benefits from OP.

The next step was to examine the characteristics of those willing to communicate outside working hours compared with all questionnaire respondents. This would provide some indications of a potential audience to support online engagement, especially with respect to how both groups perceive the union's OP. Table 2 shows the correlations between the main variables for all respondents (first row) and for those willing to communicate outside working hours separately (second row).

Certain important observations can be drawn from Table 2. First, the longer members are registered with the union, the more loyal they feel, but this is not applicable to the same extent for those willing to communicate outside working hours. Being generally supportive of the usefulness of unionism is positively correlated with participation and loyalty. Surprisingly, union instrumentality is also: (1) negatively correlated with intensity of Facebook use and (2) positively correlated with perceived benefits from online presence. Furthermore, it is important that union participation is strongly positively correlated with perceived benefits from online presence only for the whole set of respondents but not for those willing to communicate outside working hours.

Table 2. Pearson correlations (two-tailed), marked ‘\*\*\*’ if significant at the 0.01 level and ‘\*\*’ at the 0.05 level. The first row for each variable is for all respondents. The second row is for those willing to communicate outside working hours

	Years member	FB member	Age	OP	IS	UI	WEV	FBI	WP
FB member	-0.033								
Age	-0.002	-0.120							
OP	0.583**	-0.066	0.127						
IS	0.096	0.165	-0.017	0.288**					
UI	0.166	0.320**	-0.203**	0.364**	0.005				
WEV	-0.122	0.242**	-0.193*	0.279**	-0.011	0.214**			
FBI	-0.055	0.021	0.056	0.206*	0.001	0.106	0.059		
WP	0.109	-0.080	0.099	0.189**	0.075	-0.169*	0.038		
UL	0.087	-0.032	-0.074	0.201*	0.123	-0.213*	0.019	-0.077	0.501**
	0.023	0.021	-0.148	0.176*	0.029	0.427**	0.016	-0.148	0.535**
	-0.032	N/A	-0.157*	0.131	0.022	0.443**	0.258**	-0.084	
	-0.103	N/A	-0.065	0.279**	0.029	0.442**	0.232*		
	0.033	N/A	-0.065	0.152	0.029				
	0.177*	-0.030	0.115	0.128	-0.014				
	0.206*	-0.074	0.187*	0.080	-0.063				
	0.239**	0.061	0.192*						
	0.182	0.006	0.178						

OP, online presence; IS, internet skills; UI, union instrumental skills; WEV, website evaluation; FBI, intensity of Facebook use; WP, willingness to participate; UL, union loyalty.



Table 3: Regression predicting anticipated benefits towards the union's online presence (entry for  $p \leq 0.5$ , unstandardised regression coefficients B, standard error for model predictors SE,  $t$  and F-values flagged significant at  $*p < 0.05$  and  $**p < 0.01$ )

	Online presence		
	B	SE	$t$
Union loyalty	-0.45	-	-0.367
Willingness to participate	-0.37	-	-0.448
Intensity of Facebook use	0.198	0.086	2.305*
Union instrumentality	0.293	0.131	2.244*
Internet skills	0.209	0.069	3.025**
Final R square	0.216		
Adjusted R square	0.152		
F	3.361**		

SE, standard error.

Findings related to Internet skills seem to be very influential. Internet skills have no relationship with the three variables measuring offline attitudes (UI, UL and WP), but they have a significant effect on all variables related to online behaviours or expectations [FB member, age, OP and intensity of Facebook use (FBI)]. It is strongly supported that those with higher Internet skills are much more in favour of the union's online presence; this was also confirmed when the three items of the OP variable were analysed individually. Younger respondents have higher Internet skills but feel less loyal to the union's mission (loyalty increases with membership age). Being a Facebook member is only correlated with Internet skills but not age. However, intensity of Facebook use is correlated also with age, OP and UI.

The final step in the analysis was to examine how benefits from online presence can be predicted by other variables. Regression models using the socio-demographic factors as independent variables and OP as the dependent variable failed to predict any significant differences.

The rest of the variables resulted in the model shown in Table 3. Although the model is significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), the total variance explained is only about 15 per cent. Internet skills are still the most important predictor of all variables, whereas union instrumentality and intensity of Facebook also have a significant effect.

## Discussion: social media engagement and unions

The survey findings provide certain suggestions about what being active on social media or a Union 2.0 might imply. The characteristics of respondents are indicative of an audience that is more likely to engage online with the union: young, with strong Internet skills and adequate Internet access. As far as the two main questions of this paper are concerned, the survey findings point to theoretical and practical issues.

### Engagement audience and traditional participation

Certainly, those more willing to engage in union activities outside working hours are significantly affected by traditional participation and loyalty. However, offline variables are not much related to online behaviours. For those who are willing to engage outside working hours, participation (WP) is not correlated with perceived benefits from online presence. Internet experiences and skills act as the leading variables to explain attitudes about the union's online presence. This clearly indicates that, also in the context of union participation, skilled Internet users who participate online do not

need to be traditionally motivated to participate (Krueger, 2002; Gibson *et al.*, 2005; Borge and Cardenal, 2011). Furthermore, the survey confirms that younger members are the ones possessing higher Internet skills. Hence, there seems to be an appealing pathway between members' expectations, their demographics and traditional engagement variables.

Concerning the potential to attract new audiences, the answer seems to be clear: social media can indeed be useful for connecting with specific groups: those who are familiar with online spaces of interaction. For example, in the survey, the more members use Facebook, the more benefits they anticipate from the union's presence on Facebook. Online presence was also positively correlated with the union's website evaluation, suggesting that online experiences gain a reinforcing nature and build the organisation's capacity. Effectively, there seems to be a positive mechanism for unions seeking to broaden the scope of their traditional audience with atypical workers, provided that they are savvy Internet users (Greene and Kirton, 2003; Bibby, 2008).

If those who can be engaged online are not traditionally able, motivated or interested, does this mean that unions can reinvent their organisations on the web? Despite the encouraging findings and partial disconnection with offline variables, the extent to which this can happen is difficult to determine as the union's most loyal audience does remain offline. Furthermore, in the survey, union instrumentality was paradoxically correlated in a negative way with intensity of Facebook use which, in turn, was not related to participation or loyalty in the particular union. If savvy social networking users have an *a priori* negative attitude to unionism, a new model that borrows from the success of social networking sites can prove a quite challenging task (Bryson *et al.*, 2010).

Even if unions are not able to reinvent their communications online, the survey shows that they should critically exploit their strategic advantage as networks of professionals at local, national or sectorial levels. Survey respondents demonstrated this preference by supporting the union's online presence as well as providing detailed suggestions through comments to their leadership about organising social networking groups. The role of unions as official facilitators of networking in the workplace should not be undermined. By embarking on networking opportunities, younger employees can become gradually introduced to the ideas of unionism, which can significantly increase their possibility to engage in further activities such as industrial actions or social events.

The specificity of the Greek context underlines this finding, mainly in terms of the urgency that Greek unions have to promote changes and increase their capacity to engage with members in turbulent circumstances. The traditional identity and centralised leadership of Greek unions is not uncommon of other labour organisations especially in the European South. Apart from the differences between online and offline audiences, the survey suggests that those unions have to become more proactive in providing networking opportunities and leading the online debate as institutional actors of representation. Otherwise, experienced Internet users who are union members are likely to channel discussions about issues of working life in online places outside unions' control and visibility. Hence, unions have to find appropriate ways to stimulate online activity and integrate it into existing structures of collective representation.

### Practical implications

The findings of this study show that online communications have to be seen as a continuous process of understanding the audience's capacities and expectations and then tailoring the proposition of such efforts accordingly. Given the fact that Internet traditions and union structures might vastly diverge, it is necessary to identify the appropriate combination of tools that can support an engagement strategy. Further to technical expertise, knowledge of context and audience is required (when, where and with who to engage) or at least basic understanding of the audience's Internet experiences and skills.

This view complements from a different perspective the suggestion of Lucio *et al.* (2009) that, when it comes to online networking, trade unions have to be aware of the competing understandings, traditions and institutions of the Internet itself. These can become critical when engaging with members who are familiar with online spaces as many of the survey respondents. For example, in social networking groups such as Facebook, traditional models of authoritative leadership have to be adapted so that all members have opportunities to participate and express their opinions. In tools such as blogs, the style and content of information presented cannot resemble traditional announcements by media offices; instead, posts should aim to foster interactivity and exchange of opinions. The same is relevant to microblogging services such as Twitter where conversational patterns have emerged following conventions such as the symbol '@' to address other users (e.g. Honey and Herring, 2009).

Furthermore, open issues remain about the use of social media in the workplace and beyond. The survey findings were informative in terms of when and from where members visit the union's website and which other social networks they use with emphasis on Facebook. Those findings profiled an opportunity to cultivate additional networking and information sharing opportunities in an extension of the union's workplace boundaries (Greene *et al.*, 2003; Greene and Kirton, 2003; Whittall *et al.*, 2009). In the Greek case, the bank management was not enthusiastic to facilitate online engagement efforts, including the dissemination of the web survey. This has to be seen in line with research that has found corporate policies on social media use being quite conservative (Kaganer and Vaast, 2010). Unions have to be prepared to argue about the relevance of social media and how they plan to use them at the workplace and beyond.

### Concluding remarks

This paper attempts to broaden the debate of social media and trade unions by reflecting on a survey conducted with the members of a Greek union in the banking sector. The survey indicated that the majority of members were willing to interact outside working hours and that, for this group, traditional levels of loyalty and participation were not related to expectations about the union's online presence. The findings suggest that unions can develop their online strategies so that they build on their members' Internet experiences and skills. Even though unions have no direct effect on those variables, they have to actively seek information about their audience's online capacity and then fit this into engagement strategies.

Apart from audience characteristics, future studies need to assess the extent to which social media engagement impacts on union politics, traditions and ideology. The collaboration and participation aspects of social media change the nature of communications, but it cannot be assumed that union structures are able to adapt (e.g. Lucio and Walker, 2005; Lucio, 2003; Diamond and Freeman, 2002). Research needs to report on cases of how union structures can co-evolve with online tools to establish their relevance in union action repertoires. Furthermore, research can elaborate on contextual aspects that affect decisions to promote online communication strategies. In this study, the findings were affected by the Greek union's structures and its young leadership that might be more receptive to new ideas. Finally, research has to investigate the use of social media in the workplace that seems to be a new dimension in collective representation.

Apart from the specificity of the Greek context, certain additional limitations have to be made explicit with regard to the internal and external validity of this study. The online questionnaire administration and response rate raise issues of generalisation, although, as explained, a web survey suited the nature of this study to target the specific audience. Second, the questionnaire design had to adapt to certain choices that could not have been predicted; for example, in terms of using a more detailed Internet skills construct to capture relationships (Hargittai and Hsieh, in press). Third, the particular characteristics of the union's audience pose certain limitations mainly in terms of capturing differences in age and investigating the intensity of use for social networks other than Facebook.

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## Appendix

Table A1 shows the question details for the five constructs adapted from previous studies, as well as the basic reliability measures for latent constructs (all apart from Internet skills) for reliability, first of all, to ensure content validity: (1) the questionnaire was pilot tested by 15 union members resulting in small wording changes and (2) well-tested constructs were adapted from previous studies, aware of their previous context of use. Then, internal consistency was assessed through Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , with values higher than 0.60 being acceptable for exploratory research such as the one reported in this paper (Straub *et al.*, 2004). For construct validity, a Principal Component Analysis revealed that items UI, FB1 and FB2 cross loaded on different constructs above the cut-off value of 0.40. Hence, they were dropped from the analysis. The rest of the items loaded properly on intended constructs without cross-loadings (discriminant validity) and for Eigenvalues above 1 (convergent validity).

Table A1: Constructs adapted from previous studies and their reliability measures

Construct	Questions	Adapted from	Range of factor loadings	Cronbach's $\alpha$
<i>Union loyalty</i> (Five-point Likert scale)	I feel a sense of pride being part of the union. (UL1) I feel I am gaining a lot by being a union member. (UL2) I tell my friends that the union is a great organisation to be a member of. (UL3) I plan to be a member for the rest of my time as employee in the bank. (UL4) I have complete trust in the union. (UL5) Workers need unions to protect them against unfair practices of employers. (UI1) The union's actions are good examples of what unionism can achieve. (UI2) Real improvements in working conditions can only be achieved with the help of the union. (UI3)	(Metochi, 2002)	0.70–0.87	0.87
<i>Union instrumentality</i> (Five-point Likert scale)	<i>How willing would you be to:</i> Be elected as a union official (WP1) Frequently attend union meetings (WP2) Participate in collective action (WP3) Frequently participate in union's social events (WP4) About how many total Facebook friends do you have? (Less than 10, 10–49, 50–99, 100–149, 150–199, 200–249, 250–299, 300–399, 400 or more) (FB1) On a typical day, about how much time do you spend on Facebook? (No time at all, Less than 10 min, 10 to 30 min, More than 30 min – up to 1 hour, More than 1 hour– up to 2 hours, More than 2 hours – up to 3 hours, More than 3 hours) (FB2) <i>How much do you agree with the following:</i> Facebook is part of my everyday activity. (FB3) I am proud to tell people I am on Facebook. (FB4) I feel out of touch when I haven't logged into Facebook for a day. (FB5) I would be sorry if Facebook shut down. (FB6) Have you sent an attachment with an email? (IS1) Have you posted an audio, video, or image file to the Internet? (IS2) Have you personally designed a webpage? (IS3) Have you downloaded a software program to your computer from the Internet? (IS4)	(Metochi, 2002)	0.68–0.85	0.72
<i>Willingness to participate</i> (Five-point Likert scale)		(Metochi, 2002)	0.71–0.80	0.83
<i>Intensity of Facebook use</i> (FB1 & FB2 scored by order of answer) FB3, FB4, FB5, FB6 & FB7 scored on a five-point Likert scale (Responses were standardised to create an average)		(Ellison <i>et al.</i> , 2007; Valenzuela <i>et al.</i> , 2009)	0.76–0.80	0.84
<i>Internet skills</i> (Binary answers added to form the measure)		(Best and Krueger, 2005)	-	-

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