

# Digital activism as a pathway to trade union revitalization

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## Introduction

If trade unions are to find a pathway to revitalization, it is imperative that they invest in better ways to engage in the digital realm. Technological change is of critical importance for the future of unions. On the one hand, the rapid rise of the platform economy and the decentering of industrial work pose an enormous threat to their very existence (Visser 2019). On the other hand, digital tools offer a plethora of opportunities for union engagement with existing members, but also with workers in traditional and emerging sectors with low rates of unionization.

Unions have traditionally been slow to embrace new technology, and digital communication tools are no exception to this trend; however, as the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated all too clearly, it is no longer possible to imagine a future in which unions flourish without embracing digital communication tools. These technologies hold much promise: they are cheap, quick and versatile and can help unions connect with – and grow – their membership, mobilize support and influence public opinion on labour and other social issues. However, unions need to formulate a well-considered digital media engagement strategy that aligns with their organizational goals, as well as understanding both the opportunities and the challenges associated with its implementation.

## Digital technologies as an activist tool

Information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as social media and the web, offer technological affordances – things that can be done better or more easily because a technology enables them. A number of studies have warned that the ubiquity of digital technologies will alter the dynamics of contention (Segeberg and Bennett 2011) and potentially render traditional organizations irrelevant (Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2012). Digital activism, the practice of taking direct action to achieve change through digital means, brings both benefits and challenges. Traditional organizations like unions can thrive in this digital era, as long as they remain deeply connected with their grassroots membership, possibly including the use of digital tools to mobilize offline engagement.

There are three key benefits that digital engagement can provide. First, through more sophisticated use of existing digital technologies, unions can improve their capacity to advance the interests of their existing members through campaigning and organizing, as well as reaching non-unionized workers. This is one of the most important benefits in terms of union revitalization, as unions around the world have experienced membership loss, the dismantlement of their membership structure and the weakening of mobilization capacity among young workers (Carneiro and Costa 2020). Second, ICTs provide available space and opportunities for unions to advocate for their cause and gain new members (Dahlberg-Grundberg, Lundström, and Lindgren 2016). Through online tools and platforms, unions can disseminate critical information in real time, expand their support base and build online communities. Third, having to operate in a more networked, decentralized and

open environment forces unions to become more transparent in their communication and governance procedures using more distributed means of communication (Hogan, Nolan, and Grieco 2010).

While the benefits of digital engagement are undeniable, there are also many challenges with pursuing digital engagement strategies. First and foremost, unions must grapple with limits in the reach of the digital ecosystem. The popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter masks important divides in access to digital infrastructure and technology adoption and use along rural–urban, demographic, gender and socioeconomic lines. Unequal access to the internet and social media remains a challenge in many countries. In addition, online freedom has been in decline globally for ten years, a decline that has been exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shahbaz and Funk 2020), which political leaders have exploited to limit access to information, expand surveillance powers and deploy intrusive technologies in the name of public health. Unions' efforts to establish a digital profile can also bring them into conflict with various bad actors, as online spaces are saturated with misinformation, disinformation, trolling and cybercrime. Recognizing these perils of digital activism will help to prepare unions to tackle the problems as they arise and formulate thoughtful responses to these challenges.

## Background and methodology

To better understand the current practices and impacts of digitization, we examined the experiences of 11 peak union bodies across six countries in the Asia-Pacific region (Australia, Fiji, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea). These countries were selected because they have different levels of digital inequality, connectedness and openness. Even in wealthy and highly wired countries like Australia and the Republic of Korea, people from lower socio-economic backgrounds spend far less time on social media and are less confident users than their wealthier counterparts (Kemp 2021). In least developed countries, lower levels of connectivity contribute to much deeper digital inequalities. India is one of the most digitally divided societies in the world, with rural Indian women the most digitally excluded (Sheriff 2020). Urban Indians are nearly twice as likely to be connected to the internet than their rural counterparts. Gender is also highly influential. On Facebook, for example, only 24 per cent of users in India are female (Kemp 2021). Indonesia has similar, though less stark, disparities in social media usage. The urban–rural divide stands at 62 per cent versus 36 per cent in terms of internet access. YouTube users are split into 46 per cent female and 54 per cent male, while Facebook users are split into 44 per cent female and 56 per cent male. In the Philippines, the difference between urban and rural Filipinos with access to fourth generation (4G) wireless technology is 14 per cent. However, women are more active users of social media. For Facebook, 53 per cent of users are women, as are 65 per cent of Instagram users and 76 per cent of Twitter users (Kemp 2021).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are no reported data for Fiji.

The union context in these countries is equally diverse. At one end sits Australia, where unions – while rapidly diminishing in membership density – continue to play a broadly accepted role in both the political and the industrial sphere. Unions in Fiji, India, Indonesia, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea all face some level of political oppression through legislative measures, but also through surveillance and other anti-union behaviour. In Fiji, the Philippines and the Republic of Korea, governments also target individuals, sometimes violently, because of their union activities. The six countries also vary dramatically in terms of union density, collective bargaining coverage and size of the formal economy. Membership density is highest in Fiji, where 28.6 per cent of employees are union members. All other countries sit below the global average of 17 per cent (ILO 2020), with the lowest density found in Indonesia, where union members account for just 5.2 per cent of employees (DTDA and Mondiaal FNV 2020).

### **Union engagement with social media**

The digital engagement strategies of the unions we studied focus primarily on social networking sites (social media and messaging apps), as well as email and websites. Virtually all have a presence on Facebook and a few other major platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and WhatsApp. Other digital technologies that have seen significant adoption since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic are tools that facilitate online work and learning, such as Zoom (Table 1).

Across the board, the clearest point of differentiation is between use of social media platforms and messaging apps. Unions in several countries use Facebook and YouTube for general information but prefer chat apps, including Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Bend, for more targeted communication with their members. Of the 11 unions we studied, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) is the most digitally leveraged, with sizeable numbers of followers across four social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and TikTok – who are frequently engaged with its campaigns and affiliates, as well as an active and targeted email strategy. At the other end of the digital spectrum are the Indian unions, which only embraced digital technologies beyond email when the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted face-to-face communication.

The most engaged unions on Facebook – the most popular platform among the unions – were the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia, KSPI) and the Confederation of All Indonesians Trade Unions (Konfederasi Serikat Buruh Sejahtera Indonesia, KSBSI) at 2.06 per cent and 2.13 per cent, respectively. These interaction rates, measured by the amount of engagement received from the public compared with the amount of activity posted by the organizations, show that the organizations that do not post most frequently, and do not have the most well-resourced digital media teams, can still create engaged online communities.

▶ Table 1. Digital tools used by the selected peak union bodies

	Bend	Digital newsletter	Email	Facebook	Instagram	Messenger	Petitions/surveys	Signal	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube	WhatsApp	WBS Pro	Website	Zoom or similar	Integrated system
<b>Australia</b>																
ACTU		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
<b>Fiji</b>																
FTUC			✓	✓						✓		✓		✓	✓	
<b>India</b>																
BMS		✓	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
INTUC			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
SEWA		✓	✓				✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	
<b>Indonesia</b>																
KSBSI		✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
KSPI			✓	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
<b>Philippines</b>																
FFW		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			✓			✓	✓	
KMU			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓					✓	
Sentro		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓				✓	✓	
<b>Republic of Korea</b>																
FKTU	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				✓	✓			✓	✓	

ACTU: Australian Council of Trade Unions; BMS: Indian Workers' Union; FFW: Federation of Free Workers (Philippines); FKTU: Federation of Korean Trade Unions; FTUC: Fiji Trades Union Congress; INTUC: Indian National Trade Union Congress; KMU: May First Labor Movement (Philippines); KSBSI: Confederation of All Indonesians Trade Unions; KSPI: Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions; Sentro: Center of United and Progressive Workers (Philippines); SEWA: Self Employed Women's Association (India).

Twitter is the second most popular public social networking site, although in most cases unions make only limited use of their Twitter accounts. Even ACTU, which has by far the most tweets and followers, uses it for “a very particular purpose”, namely “to get materials in front of journalists and politicians and pundits”. Meanwhile, most unions in the region simply use Twitter to mirror their Facebook content – if, indeed, they use it at all. This is true even for May First Labor Movement (Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU)), the second most intensive user of the platform. As a KMU representative reported: “We don’t use Twitter independently. It mirrors the Facebook account. Workers don’t use Twitter, it’s more for engagement with the middle class, students, professionals, social media influencers and the traditional mass media who use Twitter for publication of news items.”

Unions achieve far higher levels of engagement on direct messaging platforms like chat apps, such as Messenger and WhatsApp, which they use intensively for internal communications. The challenge here, though, is the quality of that engagement. According to a representative of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), WhatsApp groups for senior leadership are an incredibly effective means of communication, but it is difficult to get cut-through in larger member groups because “most people in the WhatsApp groups just post a bunch of pictures and messages, and important messages are not visible. This is the problem with this strategy.” These apps nevertheless allow a level of internal communication that was previously unimaginable.

Representatives of the unions we studied identified without prompting the greatest benefits and challenges associated with the adoption of these digital communications shown in Table 2. All believe that the benefits of engaging with digital communication tools outweigh the challenges associated with their use. A Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) representative reported, for example: “Social media is really important in generating the support of the majority. Things generally happen really quickly, and social media is the fastest way to get the message across.” This perception was strengthened, moreover, with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the General Secretary of the Indian Workers’ Union (Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)) observed:

The pandemic has really changed the way we use digital communication tools. This is the new normal. Social media is helpful, and the fastest mode of communication. We have started an awareness programme for digital education, supported by a foundation. We are creating an awareness programme on burning issues like the labour code and the gig economy.

The pandemic has also seen a rise in digital literacy among union members and officials. Increasing acceptance of Zoom and similar platforms has generated an opportunity to increase the frequency of meetings between different levels of the union, but also between unions in different countries. Union leaders have sometimes struggled to embrace different technologies. For example, the KMU media team reported that, during the first part of the lockdown, they had to teach staff and union leaders how to make videoblogs because they could no longer go out into the field. However, these new skills, and the change in mindset that comes with them, constitute a tremendous resource.

► Table 2. Perceived benefits and challenges of digital communications

	ACTU	FTUC	BMS	INTUC	SEWA	KSBSI	KSPI	FFW	KMU	Sentro	FKTU
<b>Benefits</b>											
As a campaign tool	✓					✓	✓				✓
Brand and reputational benefits						✓	✓			✓	✓
Building networks with other social media organizations										✓	
Capacity to engage with members			✓		✓	✓		✓			
Can share uncensored views		✓									
Economical way of communicating				✓				✓			
Encourages conciseness of messaging									✓		
Feedback on programme implementation			✓								
Membership growth	✓				✓						
Raise awareness of labour issues				✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
Outreach and community-building	✓	✓		✓							
People unable to speak publicly engage		✓									
Speed of communication			✓		✓				✓		
<b>Challenges</b>											
Can discourage real-life activism					✓		✓				
Cost of producing good content				✓		✓		✓			✓
Creating good, relevant content	✓					✓		✓	✓		✓
Employer retribution against members		✓					✓				
Hard to attract attention										✓	
Irrelevant posts on officials' own pages						✓					
Lack of technical skills			✓	✓				✓		✓	
Leaking of sensitive information		✓									
Low levels of digital literacy			✓		✓						
Levels of member engagement				✓			✓			✓	
Member access to smartphones			✓		✓						
Maintaining growth	✓										✓
Threats to members from government		✓									
Time management	✓								✓		
Troll armies									✓		

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Note: institutions shown in the figure above in alphabetical order of country.

## A question of strategy

The degree of digitization and platform engagement was largely determined by the unions' resources and organizational goals. The most strategic unions tend to see digital technologies as an integral and crucial part of their membership and expansion of their influence. For them, digital communication tools are a means not merely of getting information out to their members, but also of increasing membership engagement, helping to drive campaigns and member recruitment, and strengthening relationships with affiliates and external stakeholders.

Of the 11 unions studied, ACTU stands out as having the most sophisticated digital engagement strategy, which brings together its digital media, communication, outreach and campaigning policies to drive growth. For ACTU, each digital tool serves a different target audience and purpose, but they all work towards the same integrated goal. Its social media team is tasked with "bringing non-members into the ACTU universe" by focusing both on "core" labour issues like precarious work, equal pay and occupational health and safety, and on broader social issues, including marriage equality, refugees, climate change and violence against women. It is also very active during election campaigns.

Beyond Australia, the union among our sample with the most sophisticated digital engagement strategy is KSPI in Indonesia, which also focuses heavily on lead generation. Its *Ayo Berserikat* (Let's Unionize) campaign seeks to encourage existing members to be more active, but also to engage with non-unionized workers. Like ACTU, KSPI runs social media campaigns about broader social issues as well as specific industrial disputes. Another union that has consciously targeted the general public as well as members is the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). Cognizant of anti-union attitudes in the Republic of Korea, FKTU focuses on creating content to improve the image of unions. FKTU's experience also revealed the importance of experimentation and flexibility in terms of platform use. As its Facebook performance has become less effective over time, reflecting a general downward trend in popularity of the platform in the Republic of Korea, the union diverted some of its resources to YouTube, which is now the most popular platform in the country. The fourth union with a highly tailored strategy for digital engagement was the Self Employed Women Association (SEWA). Since few of the informal workers SEWA organizes have access to even a smartphone – and many are illiterate – it does not make sense to adopt a broad-based digital strategy. Instead, SEWA largely limits its digital communications to communications with its external supporters through email and its website while limiting internal digital communications to officials and members of its research teams via WhatsApp.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Some other unions, including INTUC and KSBSI, strive to be as digitally engaged across as many platforms as possible, with varying levels of effectiveness. Others still have returned to email campaigning, as this tried-and-tested tool has seen a resurgence in popularity as a result of the rising importance of e-commerce.



Not surprisingly, these unions were also the ones that differentiated their branding for different audiences. Other unions in the study have far more homogeneous communications. For example, when asked about audience differentiation, a representative of the Philippines' Center of United and Progressive Workers (Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa, Sentro) reflected:

We haven't really thought about being more targeted. To be honest, [in] most of our work online, our main concern is our membership. Other than taking public positions on issues which are obviously directed to the general public and policymakers, most of our communications are targeted to our membership. We devote a lot of energy trying to reach out to our members, getting engagement.

It is important to recognize here that there are significant resource implications associated with a successful digital engagement strategy. It involves purchasing hardware and content management systems, but also requires engagement with a number of different platforms and a focus on content creation. All these aspects of digital communications are highly resource-intensive (Schradié 2019). In addition, digital activism is ultimately laborious: organizations with more time, money and personnel are better able to leverage the benefits of digital communication tools to make their voices heard and influence felt. ACTU has eight full-time paid positions dedicated to digital communications, embedded within a larger "growth team" of 35.<sup>3</sup> But few of the unions we studied have a dedicated budget, or even a dedicated team, for their digital communications. The presence or absence of a budget is most evident in relation to visually intensive platforms, and YouTube in particular. ACTU has in-house video production capacity, while FKTU has the funding to outsource production of video content to professional providers. Other unions rely heavily on the skills and energy of officials or volunteers.

However, while important, financial resourcing and staffing are not the only predictor of success. Skills deficits among staff and officials tasked with managing a union's digital presence – rather than staffing levels per se – are the main barrier to implementation of an effective digital engagement strategy. As an official from a KSBSI affiliate observed:

You have to be really creative and have a lot of initiative to deal with this stuff. It's about making people interested and not everyone has that skill. You need to be consistent also. You need to upload 2-3 videos a week. That requires creativity. And there's no one at the confederation level that looks after it.

In some cases, unions have access to gifted individuals with a passion for digital technologies. KMU and KSPI, two of the most digitally successful unions in our study, rely largely on donated time for their digital engagement. Indeed, in terms of overall engagement, KMU punches well above its weight, focusing on content quality and viral hashtagging, driving effective digital campaigns with limited resources.

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<sup>3</sup> The union with the second-largest digital communications team is BMS. In its case, however, team members are funded by a time-limited project. At the other end of the spectrum is INTUC, which relies entirely on volunteers. In a number of cases, unions have access to the time of staff or officials supported by their affiliates.

An additional consideration relates to security threats in the form of technical vulnerabilities and government surveillance. All unions studied have experienced at least one form of cyberattack, with “fake news” being the most common. In the Philippines, all three unions we studied reported concerns that they were not only being monitored, but also being targeted by state-funded troll farms and in fake news via red-tagging campaigns. Attacks on freedom to communicate online may also be less overt. In the Indonesian context, both unions interviewed expressed concerns about the Electronic Information And Transactions Law, which includes anti-defamation provisions that have been mobilized against unionists. In one example, a union member was arrested and charged for posting a criticism of his employer, with a picture of the company’s logo with a line drawn through it. In India, unions expressed similar concerns about the prospect of negative impacts on union activists of government regulations concerning digital communication.

A key constraint in terms of impact, meanwhile, involves the challenge of actually reaching union members. Digital unionism has not been widely adopted or accepted by rank-and-file unionists, even in highly digitalized contexts. In a study of six large unions in Europe and the United States of America, Carneiro and Costa (2020) found that union members rarely engage with their organizations online. Part of the problem was that most digital activity was unidirectional and hierarchical, consisting largely of organizations broadcasting information on various digital media platforms, with little interaction with their members or with the general public. A similar pattern was found among the unions we studied. They also made infrequent use of readily available analytical tools to assess the effectiveness of their digital engagement, which would have helped them to better understand the reach of their communications. Indeed, only ACTU and KSPI systematically use platform analytics to identify the content that is most popular, and the language that gains the most traction, as well as collecting contact data through online registration and surveys.

## **Conclusion**

For today’s unions, embracing digital technologies is no longer a choice, but a necessity. The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought havoc globally, but it has also thrust generations of workers, union members and union officials into a far more digitalized world. Faced with lockdowns and prolonged periods of workers working from home, unions have had to rely heavily on digital tools to communicate internally and externally. The capacity and appetite for digital engagement has never been higher, even in contexts where digital resources are least available, and this constitutes an unparalleled opportunity to drive digital engagement. The real challenge facing unions now is how best to harness digital technologies in meeting their organizational objectives. Unions that are successful in digital engagement are those that have the right staff and strategy to leverage digital tools to advance their goals. The pandemic has also created a situation where the importance of worker collectivity has been reinforced by laying bare the many dimensions of deficits in decent work.

In light of these challenges, unions can improve their digital engagement in the following ways.

- ▶ Create a digital strategy policy that outlines the union's organizational capacities, goals and policy guidelines when using digital communication tools.
- ▶ Investigate ways to enhance internal and external ICT capabilities that are aligned with organizational structure and resources. Unions may consider applying for funding from philanthropic organizations, for example, that can provide social media campaigning capacity should the union lack internal resources.
- ▶ Identify talent within the union that can help to generate a robust digital strategy and develop digital communication capabilities. This "talent" may include members or even staff who are not traditionally considered for such a role, but who have the necessary knowledge of and interest in digital media engagement.
- ▶ Conduct or sign up for free training offered by digital media platforms or civil society organizations that will help to increase the knowledge of privacy, cybersecurity and policy relevant to digital media engagement.

In these ways, unions can leverage digital technologies to strengthen their communication, extend their reach and advocate for their members and the general public in innovative ways – and in the process promote their own organizational revitalization.

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