Organising Online:  
Where next for unions and the internet?

2pm-5pm, Friday 12th November  
Jurys Hotel, next door to TUC Congress House, Great Russell Street, London WC1
Summary of IPPR seminar ‘Organising Online: Where next for unions and the internet?’

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Agenda

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<td>Trade Union Membership and the internet: Lessons from civil society</td>
<td>Will Davies, Senior Research Fellow, IPPR</td>
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<td>Casting The Net Wider: Ten Tips For Taking The E-Union To The Next Level.</td>
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<td>Unifi4jobs: Nigel Diamond, The Internet Corporation</td>
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<td>Labour Party – Web in a Box: Allen Jones, Big New World</td>
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4.30 pm  Plenary discussion & Close

**Biographies**

**Brendan Barber**
Brendan joined the TUC in 1975 as a policy officer dealing with training issues. He went on to hold a variety of positions including of assistant secretary in the Organisation and Industrial Relations Department, head of the TUC Press and Information Department, head of the Organisation and Industrial Relations Department, deputy general secretary, and then, in June 2003 he became General Secretary. He was a driving force in the United Against Racism campaign. He has also played a prominent role in the establishment of the TUC Organising Academy - training organisers to help unions boost membership, and the Partnership Institute, whose aim is to promote partnership style relations between employers and unions. Recently he has helped establish new negotiating machinery in the university sector and worked hard to build better relations between all the unions in the schools sector. He has worked closely with John Monks in the area of government relations.

Brendan Barber is a Non-Executive Director of the Court of the Bank of England. He was a member of the ACAS Council from 1995 until May 2004. He was also a member of Sport England from 1999 until 2003.

**Roger Darlington**
Following 24 years as a national official with the Communication Workers Union, Roger Darlington is now a portfolio worker in the communications field: He is a consultant to the Communication Workers Union, which represents all the non-management staff in Royal Mail, British Telecom, and related information technology companies, and to Connect, which represents managerial and professional staff in the telecoms and IT industries. He is the Chair of the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), a body established by British Internet service providers to combat illegal content, especially child abuse images, on the UK Internet. He is a Member of the Ofcom Consumer Panel which provides independent advice to the regulator on broadcasting and telecommunications issues. He runs his own web site: http://www.rogerdarlington.co.uk/

**Will Davies**
Will Davies is a Senior Research Fellow on the Digital Society programme at the Institute for Public Policy Research. Previously, he worked on The Work Foundation's iSociety project, where his research focused on the relationship between communities and new media. He is the author of two iSociety reports *You Don't Know Me, But...: Social Capital & Social Software* looking at new uses of the internet in supporting social networks, and *Proxicommunication: ICT and the Local Public Realm* exploring uses of ICT in sustaining local communities.
**Nigel Diamond**
Nigel Diamond is Head of Business Development for The Internet Corporation, a web based services company specialising in E-Recruitment. Nigel has been personally involved in the formation of several web based job boards for unions and trade associations alike, as well as working on E-recruitment projects in the private sector.

**Joanne Graham**
Joanne is the Head of Administration at Connect - the union for professionals in communications. Joanne lead the online joining project team - this project resulted in significant cost and resource saving to the union. Prior to joining Connect, Joanne worked in the private sector and in the trade union movement in both the UK and Australia.

**Allen Jones**
Allen studied theoretical physics at Sussex and Oxford Universities before joining Deloitte, Haskins and Sells Management Consultants where he specialised in financial and tax modelling. This was followed by a period in the Corporate Planning department at BP International as an econometrician working on long term planning models for BP Exploration.

In 1982 Allen founded Copernicus Limited a software house focussed on leasing and instalment credit software which now has major customers such as Bank of Scotland and BMW Financial Services. In 2000 he founded Big New World which gained the contract to supply an easy to use web site development tool for the Labour Party. Web in a Box is now used by a growing number of around 200 Labour MPs, candidates and groups.

Allen is also involved in Mobile Productivity a Java software provider for mobile phones linked to web sites and Four Dimensional Learning a web based communication styles assessment and development specialist.

Allen lives in Oxford with his wife Gabriel. He has four sons and a daughter.

**Paul Nowak**
Paul took up post as the TUC’s New Unionism Project Director, and subsequently National Organiser, in May 2002. Prior to this appointment he was the TUC’S regional secretary in the North East & Cumbria.

Paul currently leads on the TUC’s work to support union efforts on organising and recruitment, which includes the development and delivery of the TUC Organising Academy. Paul also co-ordinates the TUC’s ‘Leading Change’ training and development programme for senior union officers, and supports the TUC’s work on inter-union relations.

**John Wood**
John Wood is Campaigns and New Media Officer at the Trades Union Congress, responsible for the TUC’s internet presence and new business development online. Prior to this he worked as Online Producer and eCommerce Projects Manager at Oxfam.
Summary of ippr seminar ‘Organising Online: Where next for unions and the internet?’

The following is a summary of the themes of the ippr seminar Organising Online: Where next for unions and the internet? prepared by Emily Keaney, Research Assistant, ippr.

The papers:
The slides from all the presentations as well as links to the full reports or papers can be found at www.ippr.org/digitalsociety under the link to events. Brendan Barber opened the seminar and did not use PowerPoint so a brief summary of his presentation is given below. Further details are also given on John Wood’s presentation.

Brendan Barber
Brendan placed the organising challenge at the heart of the TUC and the union mission. The unions currently have around six and a half million members but twenty five years ago there were over twelve million. There is a huge task ahead if we are to rebuild and renew membership.

He identified new opportunities. The new rights for workers to be informed and consulted are major changes which provide a chance to show the power of the collective voice. The learning and skills agenda is also a big opportunity. However he also identified the importance of working out how unions set about reaching out and communicating their message and engaging new members.

He admitted that the Trade Union movement can be slow to change and adapt but emphasised how important it was that it grabs the power of technology and uses it to support union aims in new ways. The internet is not an alternative for the basic work of demonstrating unions’ value but it can support this work.

John Wood
www.unionreps.org.uk
The TUC’s online community for union workplace activists, unionreps.org.uk, has signed up over 5,000 union representatives in its first year, and allows members to discuss the issues they face at work with reps from other unions or other regions of the country. Exchanging experiences with their peers gives reps a new source of support, and complements unions’ more formal mechanisms for co-ordinating networks.

www.workSMART.org.uk
The TUC, the umbrella body for the UK’s unions is also engaging with the new challenges of the internet, to foster an internet environment in which unions can prosper. workSMART.org.uk is a free advice portal for everyone at work, especially non-union members, who can’t draw on a union’s legal services for support. Interactive tools help people with tasks such as evaluating their pension options, or choosing the relevant union if they wish to join. Content syndication to major Internet Service Provider Tiscali has helped many thousands more UK web users find out about their working rights. It is a way of introducing what unions can do back into people’s lives where it is relevant to them.

www.morethanwork.net
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This site is aimed at working students and aims to assist them to identify their skills, build a successful C.V, understand their employment rights and find contact details for their local Job Shop. It also includes a union finder.

The discussion:
In general participants felt that while there may be issues with both security and monitoring who becomes a member this is something that unions need to do. It was felt that widening democracy is vital if unions are to bring their numbers back up. The Connect example was seen as encouraging because it shows people that unions are ready for the modern world and it was hoped that many of these initiatives could open up new fields for recruiting. The discussion had three main points of focus: the need for democratisation versus the traditional union strength of many voices speaking a single message; issues around membership and the regulations surrounding who could become a member and how and the various areas in which ICT could potentially be used. These are discussed below:

Democratisation v. the power of a single voice
In Will’s presentation he mentioned the importance of a clear and consistent voice for an organisation. This prompted some discussion with some participants expressing concern that this was not necessarily what unions should be providing. It was felt to be very important that there is space for lots of different voices so that unions do not ostracise the different groups that they should be organising. Will pointed out that he was mainly referring to organisations which start online and move offline and the difficulties they have in finding leadership and a collective voice. However it was generally felt that even within unions it is important that while there is democracy and the ability to give space to a wide variety of viewpoints it is still remembered that the power is derived from the collective voice. Democratising the unions and increasing participation is important. Most participants felt that it was possible for unions to create a single coherent voice while allowing diversity and dissent. Technology can enable the rank and file members to express a view and through blogs in particular to express that view directly to the General Secretary and that can feed in to the decision making process and the setting of strategic priorities.

Membership issues
It was felt by many participants that if online joining was to be successful it would be necessary to simplify the signing up process. Many of the rules on who can join are incredibly rigid and it was suggested that unions may need to rethink the way they operate. It may be necessary to revise the rule book to make it easier for people to join and participate. Some people however were concerned that this would make it easier for strike breakers etc to join unions. One participant was also concerned that the enthusiasm surrounding the internet risks weakening union membership through an overly libertarian attitude to technology. However in general it was felt that this is not a risk if the technology is used properly as it allows the user to define very precisely who is a member.

How we can use it
- Texting – Texting was suggested as a cheap and easy way of communicating with members and one representative from Unison told the meeting that they are
already using it. They had a high profile TV campaign and contacted their stewards by text message to ask about it. They found using text messaging very useful.

- Virtual branches – Many participants agreed that virtual branches could be useful for those distributed over a wide area. The Communication Workers Union in Ireland has a virtual branch for teleworkers. Unions in Australia also have virtual branches. This is particularly important as the size of the country makes meeting up in person very difficult. LHNU also do all online organising for their transport people and ASU have a global branch online.

- Campaigns - The internet could be very useful for campaigns. It should be possible to click once on a link on a union website to get all the relevant information and to take action.

- Online Education – The internet allows unions to offer completely new services, for instance online education. This is an area which has been overlooked so far but is an exciting way for unions to offer new services.

- Peer to peer networking – It was pointed out that the first thing that alumni associations do is allow members access to their databases. This is an incredibly valuable resource with huge possibilities for unions. McKinsey have an alumni book which is given to people as an incentive for long service. If the internet is seen as a source of connectivity then member to member connectivity is a very important aspect and it was suggested that unions should facilitate this kind of connectivity among their members. It was also suggested that as well as membership directories within unions a cross union directory could be very useful, and this was put forward as a role for the TUC.

- Discussion fora - Some people had had trouble creating and running successful discussion forums. It was suggested that they work best if they are moderated, are on specific issues and have a time limit. However there were some concerns. Unions were advised to protect themselves against liability and not to allow anonymous postings as these might be used libellously or maliciously.