

Social Media for Unions: Developing Guidelines & Best Practice

- *Macdara Doyle, Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Sept 15, 2015*

I.

Collectively, we have never fully engaged with social media.

But we are not exceptional in this.

Social media is but a component part of the new digital economy which is busily transforming how we live, work and communicate.

It has wrought huge changes in the media sector and could inflict similar damage – in terms of job losses – across the rest of the economy.

One recent study suggested that as many as **47% of existing jobs in the US** may be at risk, with the figures for the **EU ranging from 47-62%**.

And if Amazon is the flagship employer of this new digital economy, we're all in trouble.

These are huge changes and that partly explains why social media can terrify and fascinate us in equal measure.

We can be overawed by the technology and intimidated by the terminology.

But we're also enthused by the idea of communicating **directly** with large numbers of people, without having to negotiate filters or have our views **mediated by a third party**.

That's the promise and the problem with social media.

Your message can be precisely directed in terms of your own choosing - but make a mistake and you do it in full public view.

In 2014, the Congress Communications Group conducted a survey of unions' engagement with social media.

It was unscientific, but revealing. Responses from 14 unions:

- 13 were organisationally active on social media, but **only one** had a full time social media officer;
- All others handled social media as part of existing job spec, but **only four** had received any training; (unionised building site)

- And **just six organisations** had drawn up social media guidelines for staff and operatives' usage.

It has improved since, but I suspect it is down to the professionalism of the people involved that unions were not deluged with a flood of social media disasters.

No surprise that Facebook was once described as 'millions of HR accidents waiting to happen.'

II.

We may be unsure about what social media can do for unions, but that lack of certainty is not shared by everyone.

The UK's Tory government is currently trying to strip trade unions of every right they have won over the last century, via the Trade Union Bill.

If enacted, it will severely impair unions' capacity to ballot, strike and campaign.

It will impose ballot thresholds, restrictions on picketing and curtail social media/ digital campaigns.

It demands that unions publish their protest and picketing plans in advance. (SLIDE 3)

The TUC says this means unions will have to report:

".....if they plan to use social media, including Twitter and Facebook during their campaign and what they plan to set out (write) on websites and blogs."

Your key campaign messages and strategy must be revealed two weeks ahead of a campaign starting.

Which renders it useless.

And online union content will be monitored during the dispute.

The TUC says:

".....Employers will argue that unions are responsible for the actions (on social media) of union officials, including full-time officers, branch secretaries and union workplace representatives."

But social media is fluid and not amenable to centralised control, so:

"Will a union member who changes their Twitter profile to reflect their union's logo be considered to have been tweeting on behalf of the union or of themselves?"

“Will a workplace representative whose Twitter profile recognises their voluntary union role be seen as running a personal or an organisational account?”

Will unions be responsible for all content that just mentions or references them, or is posted by supporters?

The Tories are very worried about the potential power of social and digital media for unions.

Employers will not be subject to the same strictures nor any other campaign groups.

Unchecked, this will create very difficult precedents for unions everywhere - especially if it is seen to work.

III.

And we may soon have another notable precedent from Australia.

On April 25, sports journalist Scott McIntyre joined an online conversation on Twitter in relation to ANZAC Day.

McIntyre worked with SBS – a major Australian radio and TV operator.

His remarks attracted strong criticism, including from Australian Minister for Communications, Malcolm Turnbull.

It later emerged that Turnbull also made contact with SBS.

McIntyre was gone the next day.

Ironically, his sacking was criticised by a group (Soldier On) that represents Australian military veterans as a ‘free speech’ issue.

SBS said his remarks breached their social media policy.

But Scott McIntyre did not defame or libel anyone. He did not criticise, or impugn the reputation of his employer. And he was commenting on matters outside his normal work responsibility.

But he expressed a political opinion that ran counter to the prevailing culture.

His other mistake was to have a large Twitter following, some 31,000.

That probably sealed his fate.

McIntyre has lodged a claim with the Fair Employment Commission on the grounds that Australia’s Fair Work Act protects staff from ‘adverse action’ for expressing a political opinion.

The outcome could prove significant, in terms of social media usage for trade unions, whose staff often operate in 'politicised environments'.

SBS has since been hit with another legal action from a female employee who shared an article on Facebook, lamenting the lack of ethnic diversity among SBS employees.

She too was sacked and has lodged an unfair dismissal claim.

Note she shared the article: she did not write it, comment on it or endorse it. Presumably SBS argue that reposting constitutes an endorsement.

Again, this could have longer-term implications for all users.

IV.

As mentioned, the key problem with social media is that mistakes are made in public and the bigger your social media presence, the bigger your blunder.

These examples illustrate some of key errors made online:

#MYNYPD

In 2014, attempting to counteract negative publicity around the police, they created a special hashtag - **#mynypd** - to encourage people to post positive pictures and stories to Twitter.

The idea was to create a stream of positive images and stories about NYPD that would have propaganda value, to be crude.

Instead people took it as an invitation to post negative pictures and stories. Critically, they misjudged the public mood and the nature of social media where users are more likely to be critical of institutions.

They also failed to understand that once you open up a conversation on social media and invite contributions, you have little or no control over what is said.

American Apparel

On July 4 last, the company tried to capitalise on the festive mood in the US and posted a celebratory picture on social media.

They chose an artistically rendered picture of fireworks - or so they thought. But it was actually the Space Shuttle Challenger exploding.

They learned the hard way that you must check and clear all materials you use, especially pictures and video clips.

HMV

As a matter of course, HMV allowed staff access to the official Twitter account, to boost online activity and market products.

But it backfired when they decided to cut staff numbers as they forgot to close the account or change the passwords.

The result was that some 60 staff used the official Twitter account to lambast the company publicly.

The lesson is that you should always retain control of your accounts and passwords.

As one staff member tweeted: "Never fire the social media people until you've changed the passwords: @hmvtweets has gone rogue."

V.

Developing Guidelines for Trade Unions

Sometimes it may seem that social media is so new and so transformative that we must start from scratch and devise entirely new rules.

Not true, social media is as amenable to common sense as the written word.

Key Issues:

- *Do you need to be engaged on social media? Does it suit your organisation, will it add value? Do you have the resources?*
- *Should always be a clear rationale behind engagement*

Social media is littered with barely used accounts with digital tumbleweed running through them

- *If possible, appoint a **dedicated social media person** – even part time - and provide **training** for who use social media for the organisation*

- Draw up **clear guidelines**, covering organisational and staff use and consult staff when doing so
- Apply **common sense** to any policy or guidelines - .i.e. if they wouldn't put it in a work email or letter, don't post it!
- Ensure **contractors/ freelance** also briefed
- Ensure people **add disclaimers** to private accounts, where they mention organisation
- Request all **report abuse/ criticism** to designated people
- If there are **multiple accounts** be clear who uses and has password
- Keep **record of all official users and passwords**. Need to know who is using on your behalf
- Designate people with **power to block, delete, shut down**
- Where errors happen, **respond quickly**.

Key Points to include in organisational guidelines

- 1. Bringing the union into disrepute:**
 - aggressively criticising or entering into personal arguments with colleagues online;
 - make defamatory comments about individuals or other groups
 - post links to any inappropriate images or other content
- 2. Breaching confidentiality:**
 - giving away confidential information;
 - discussing the internal workings of the union or its future business plans;
 - that have not been communicated to the public;
- 3. Breaching copyright:**
 - using someone else's images or written content without permission
 - failing acknowledge where permission has been given to reproduce something
- 4. Discrimination, bullying, harassment:**
 - offensive or derogatory/ bullying comments relating to sex, gender, race (including nationality), disability, sexual orientation, religion, belief or age, civil status
 - posting images (or links) that are discriminatory or offensive

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