

# Using Technology to Organise

## - a guide for trade union activists

**U**nions face unprecedented attacks from the Coalition government - we face our biggest challenge for a generation. The ConDem government seems determined to finish what Thatcher started, and to decimate the public sector and the unions. To survive in this climate, we need to build the broadest possible coalition against the cuts.

There is an ideological attack on trade unions and the public sector. The right wing have quite successfully managed to shift the blame for the financial crisis from the banks to public sector workers. The result is that even people who are sympathetic to unions will often say we need to be “realistic” in the “current economic climate”. To challenge this, we need to take the union narrative to the public. There is an alternative: the welfare state, with the NHS and all its provisions, was created in the aftermath of World War 2, when the UK faced a much more serious economic crisis than it does now. The issue facing us is primarily ideological, not economic.

Much of the media is controlled or heavily influenced by right wing ideologies, and it is difficult to make our voices heard above the relentless calls for cuts.

New technology, with its networking potential, can help us to bypass the traditional media and speak directly to people.

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**A**few years ago, you needed a certain amount of technical expertise to use new technologies - for instance, to create a website you needed to be able to code HTML, understand Internet infrastructure and so on. However, the development of web 2.0 has changed this. Easy to edit, dynamic and participative content can be created by just about anyone with a computer and Internet connection. This opens up a whole new world of communication for trade union activists - for the first time, we can develop our own web presence and communicate directly with each other.

Smartphones, like iPhone, Android and BlackBerry mean we can have web 2.0 technology while we're mobile, too.

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**Y**our union has a communications department that has a democratic mandate to communicate policy, analysis and news to members, the media and the wider public. However, it is often difficult for union communicators to capture the full flavour of life at the workplace, and so it is important that ordinary activists develop media strategies too, and create networks of activists - including those in other unions and the community.

Ideally, every union branch should have a communications officer, trained in different forms of media and responsible for e-communications.

### Introduction



### Web 2.0

### Your union



# Understanding your tools

**Email** is the killer app for trade unions - don't neglect it in favour of more glamorous technologies. Most trade union activists have email access now, and email lists are still the most effective way of reaching large numbers of people.

Email is beginning to lose some of its effectiveness because of the huge volume of messages that most of us get, but a well-organised and comprehensive email list is a fundamental tool in any union activist's arsenal.

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**H**aving a union or campaign website is important; it allows you to tell your story in your own words, and to provide an information resource for other activists. Web 2.0 tools mean creating your own website is easier than ever. The easiest way to create a website for your branch or campaign is to use blogging software like Blogger or Wordpress. By logging on to Wordpress.com you can quickly create a website, using a number of free templates. You can also choose a custom domain for a small fee - for instance, [www.yourunion.org](http://www.yourunion.org).

If you have some technical skills and need a more sophisticated, fully functional website, you can install the open source Wordpress software on your own server and adapt it to suit you.

Websites are easy to create, but difficult to maintain: it is important to keep a union website up to date with fresh, relevant content, and it is a lot of hard work to find the time to write articles, and to promote your website to potential readers. One good way to solve this problem is to create a group blog with a number of contributors. That way, everyone can post articles and there is less of a burden on individual contributors.

It is also useful to network with other union bloggers. One way to do this is to register your blog at the union blog aggregator, [tigmoo.co.uk](http://tigmoo.co.uk).

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**B**ecause Facebook is the most successful social networking site in history, it is important for trade union activists to have a presence there. Facebook has 500 million users, which makes it a good place to meet people. Facebook is also very good for sharing information with a lot of people very quickly, as you can easily post links, videos and more on your profile page.

It is a good idea to create a Facebook Page or Group for your branch or campaign, and to keep it updated with relevant information. You can also use Events to invite people to meetings.

Facebook has a number of serious pitfalls, though. The most important of these is **privacy**. Because Facebook's privacy settings are complex and changing all the time, it is almost impossible to guarantee that messages will remain private, and there have been numerous cases of employers disciplining people for messages posted there. Facebook can also be very distracting, with constant requests to play Farmville and so on.

Facebook makes its money from data mining user information and selling it to advertisers - it is not a very union friendly environment. Use with caution.

## Email



## Websites



## Facebook



**T**witter is a dynamic communications medium that has exploded in popularity recently. Its potential for campaigns has been evident ever since Iranian democracy activists used it to successfully publicise the events surrounding the contested election in 2009.

Twitter's strength is its simplicity: there is very little to get in the way of effective communication. Messages can be posted on the Internet, from a smart phone or even from a regular mobile phone: it's like sending a text message to the world.

Twitter has a relatively simple syntax, which, once mastered, makes it easy to spread information quickly. The five most important elements are:

- @replies - the symbol '@' identifies a user, and allows you to address them or speak about them (useful for letting politicians know what you think - imagine a hustings with thousands of people contributing)
- #hashtags allow you to search for information on a subject - for instance, users use the hashtag '#cuts' to talk about the effect of the #tory spending cuts in #ukpolitics and #unions.
- RT - means retweet, or forward a message
- DM - Direct Message. To send a private message to a user.
- URL shorteners - to embed links in tweets, users use URL shortening services like s.coop and bt.ly to create short Internet addresses. Many

Twitter applications do this automatically.

If you decide to create a Twitter account, look for users who have similar interests to you, and follow them - there are already thousands of union and labour activists on Twitter. Interact with them and you will soon create a network that will provide you with relevant, up to date information.

## Twitter



**U**nionBook was created by LabourStart as a trade union alternative to Facebook. Unlike Facebook, UnionBook is a union-friendly environment where your privacy is respected, and you can network with trade union activists from around the world.

Like Facebook, it allows you to share videos and other links, create groups and so on. It contains the latest union news, jobs and even music and podcasts.

Visit <http://www.unionbook.org/> today and create an account.

## Unionbook

**Y**ou Tube makes sharing video very easy, and trade unions have made a concerted effort over the past few years to create union videos that are accessible and interesting. Every year, the TUC holds a 60 Second Ad contest for the best You Tube advertisement for trade unions, and LabourStart has a Labour Video of the Year competition. Video can be used to share innovative campaigns, like this trade union flash mob: <http://s.coop/badhotel>.

Video cameras have become relatively cheap, and some mobile phones shoot decent video. It is very easy to upload the video to You Tube, and to share it on Twitter, Facebook or your website. If you fancy yourself as a film maker, why not beg, borrow or steal a camera and make a short film. In some cities, union activists or trade councils have started labour film makers groups, and collaborate on making short You Tube films.

## You Tube



# The union movement needs you to be creative!

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**F**lickr is a photo sharing site that allows you to post photographs online and share them with other users. If you like taking pictures at marches and demonstrations, you can add them to the **Industrial, Labour and Trade Unions** group at <http://www.flickr.com/groups/union/> - a resource bank with over 5,000 union photos. If you use a Creative Commons license on your photos, other users will be able to use them. Flickr is useful if you need to illustrate a newsletter or website - there are loads of pictures you can use for free.

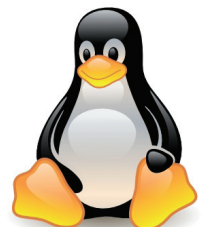
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Flickr

flickr

**F**ree and Open Source software (FOSS) and Creative Commons provide a number of valuable free tools for activists. There are FOSS applications for just about anything: complete operating systems like Linux, as well as programs for creating newsletters, graphic design, photo manipulation and page layout. These are all available free of charge, and without copyright restrictions, on the Internet. Linux also has the advantage of being much more secure than Windows, as it is not susceptible to viruses, and can run on older computers. If you enjoy experimenting with software, it is worth exploring the world of FOSS. If you want to try a FOSS operating system, Linux Mint is a good place to start: <http://www.linuxmint.com/>

Open Source



Creative Commons is an alternative to Copyright, and it allows you to share what you create while still retaining some rights over it. You can specify what rights you reserve. This is useful for union activists, as sharing creative resources means we can work collectively on our project of building a fairer society.

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**W**e have discussed a number of different technologies above. None of them exist in isolation: our move towards what is called 'web 3.0', or the semantic web, means that different technologies are increasingly integrated with each other.

Conclusion

For instance, if you use Wordpress to create a union website, you can import all your content from Flickr, You Tube, Twitter and so on, and set it to automatically update to keep your site fresh and dynamic. You can also import content from other websites - such as a news feed from your union.

New technologies offer a great opportunity for union activists to network directly with each other, to share resource and good practice, and to support each other in campaigns.

Go out and experiment. Good luck in your cyber activism!

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