

[Alex Bryson](#), Rafael Gomez and Paul Willman
Online social networking and trade union membership: what the Facebook phenomenon truly means for labor organizers
Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Original citation:

Bryson, A., Gomez, R. and Willman, P. (2010) *Online social networking and trade union membership: what the Facebook phenomenon truly means for labor organizers*. [Labor history](#), 51 (1). pp. 41-53. ISSN 0023-656X
DOI: [10.1080/00236561003654719](https://doi.org/10.1080/00236561003654719)

© 2010 [Routledge](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27771/>
Available in LSE Research Online: April 2012

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final manuscript accepted version of the journal article, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer review process. Some differences between this version and the published version may remain. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

**Online Social Networking and Trade Union Membership:
What the Facebook Phenomenon Truly Means For Labour Organizers***

Alex Bryson^a, Rafael Gomez^b, and Paul Willman^c

^a *NIESR and CEP, London, UK; ^b Department of Management, London School of Economics, London, UK; and ^c Department of Management, London School of Economics, London, UK*

(Received December 2008)

ABSTRACT: Union membership has declined precipitously in a number of countries, including in the US over the past 50 years. Can anything be done to stem this decline? This paper argues that union voice is a positive attribute (among others) of union membership that is experiential in nature and that unlike the costs of unionization, can be discerned only after exposure to a union. This makes the act of ‘selling’ unionism to workers (and to some extent firms as well) difficult. Supportive social trends and social customs are required in order to make unionization’s hard-to-observe benefits easier to discern. Most membership-based institutions face the same dilemma. However, recent social networking organizations such as Facebook have been rather successful in attracting millions of active members in a relatively short period of time. The question of whether the union movement can appropriate some of these lessons is discussed with reference to historical and contemporary examples.

Keywords: union membership growth; union voice; social networks; internet

* **Corresponding author:** Alex Bryson. Email: a.bryson@niesr.ac.uk

Introduction

In early 2007, Derek Blackadder, a Canadian labour activist, was banned from using his Facebook account not once, but twice, for allegedly breaching Facebook’s limit on sending more than 1,000 messages at a time and for masking his organizational affiliation behind his individual profile on the site. Both ‘rules’ had been flouted before, with many companies maintaining their own Facebook sites at the time of Blackadder’s

ban. Given that the rules were subsequently relaxed, the question of why this particular behaviour had drawn the attention of Facebook's administration when it did raised concerns.

It turns out that the ban coincided with a union organizing drive that Blackadder was leading and the firm's complaints that workers were using company time to organize using the social network. Blackadder was eventually reinstated following an on-line protest organized by fellow union activist Eric Lee and followers of the LabourStart website he co-founded. Yet despite the bad feelings that this episode produced amongst some union activists, Blackadder has remained decidedly positive about the promise that on-line social networks such as Facebook can bring to trade union members interested in organizing.¹

Discussion of the links between trade unions and the burgeoning growth of on-line technologies has, up to now, followed a well trodden path, not too dissimilar from the debate surrounding the Blackadder case. In one corner are trade union advocates of web-based social networking and internet labour organizing. These Web 2.0 adherents argue that the internet represents the future for a growing segment of workers who spend more time on-line than anywhere else. Neglecting the internet, according to the pro-web advocates, is one reason why union membership growth has stagnated and especially so amongst young workers.

In the opposite corner are the sceptics of internet-based organizing. They point to recent cases of where the much touted revolution of user-generated web content and social networking has slammed the door shut on trade union activists. These critics are supported by recent critiques of the internet's future by Zittrain and others,² which warn

that the openness and so-called ‘generativity’ of the web – i.e., the ability for users to create and innovate in ways that are unknown by the creators of the technologies themselves -- is being severely constrained.

Ziitrain in particular points to two disturbing trends. First, is the displacement of malleable PCs with internet-centered products that are tethered and cannot be easily modified by users (e.g, iPhones, Blackberry’s). Second are the new Web 2.0 platforms (e.g., Facebook, Google) that provide the appearance of generativity but which, unlike Web 1.0, can be closely monitored and eliminated from a central source. The case of Derek Blackadder is just one obvious illustration of this potential ‘lock-down’.³

The problem is that both the positive and negative camps essentially view the internet as another medium or communication tool for trade union organising. But, there is another way in which the internet-union debate could be structured, and that is around the attributes that have made the internet and on-line social networking, in particular, so hugely popular. In short, the question could be reframed around whether the attributes of on-line social networking, rather than the technology, can be applied to union activities?

With over 130 million active members worldwide, Facebook is an excellent example of one of the largest and fastest growing membership-based organizations in the world, rivalling only major religions in scope and scale. More to the point, at the same time that union membership has been falling, a new membership based institution has been able to add millions of members of all ages across the globe. How did this happen? Are the two events related in some way? And perhaps more importantly, can some of the factors that have made internet-based social-networking so successful in attracting active

members be applied to the current union movement's need to expand its own membership base?

It is our contention that trade unions -- especially those operating in Wagner-style systems where membership is acquired by organizing individuals and individual workplaces -- need to do a better job of invoking and selling the hard-to-observe aspects of union voice to both employers and employees if they are to achieve union membership rates comparable to their 1950s peaks.⁴ We argue that unions can learn how to market these hard-to-observe benefits by studying and appropriating techniques from contemporary membership-based institutions such as Facebook and other successful on-line networking communities. The paper derives certain insights from similar historical social trends and examines their link with union ascendancy and subsequent decline. This argument is distinct from current efforts by trade unions to use Facebook to reach current or potential members, and also dissimilar from efforts to devise on-line union rivals to Facebook.⁵

From Two to the Many Faces of Unionism

What is meant by the oft used expression "the two faces of unionism"? Borrowing heavily from Bruce Kaufman and Freeman and Medoff,⁶ the two faces refer to union rent seeking behaviour and union voice. The union wage premium and its correlates -- in the form of improved working conditions and benefits -- constitute the rent seeking and monetary advantages of union membership for workers. These same benefits, however, also correspond to the costs of unionisation to the firm.⁷

Labor History

The counterpoint to this rent seeking face is employee voice. The provision of an institutionalised mechanism by which labour and management can communicate and bargain without fear of major repercussions, is the second (not so) visible face of unionism. Voice -- defined here as formal two way communication between employees and employers -- can offer a number of benefits to a workplace.⁸ In the presence of voice, employees are less likely to quit when work related problems arise; and managers are more likely to learn things about their own workplace that they may otherwise not have known or, crucially, ever thought of asking. Voice can, in this instance, be of benefit to both parties, which is why it is typically viewed as the positive face of unionism.⁹

To understand why unions -- in particular those in the US which are the focus of our analysis here -- have had such a hard time adding sufficient numbers to their membership rolls, one must first recognize that there are other faces to unionism beyond those listed above. These are aspects of unionism that in the parlance of consumer theory would normally constitute product 'attributes' only fully observed after 'purchase.'

The notion of union membership as a multi-attribute good with a mix of 'search' and 'experience' characteristics captures this reality.¹⁰ Our characterization of union membership as an *experience* good occurs in a context where the bulk of benefits that accrue to both workers and firms (such as greater tenure, more family friendly policies, and a safer workplace) are only accurately revealed *after* a union is in place.¹¹ The fact that the costs of unionization in the form of dues and wage premium are fully known upfront makes union membership appear more like a *search* good. And indeed, if this were all that unionism had to offer, then any of the additional complexities brought on by experiential learning would disappear.

However, these easy-to-observe attributes do not represent the full extent of union benefits, which are mostly hidden from simple search. This in turn creates risks for parties prior to adoption. Risky or unknown benefits prior to adoption create delay on the part of employees and opposition on the part of employers (which over the scale of a normal lifetime can appear perpetual in many cases).

There is also a well-established literature in cognitive psychology which details how the anticipation of regret – brought about by uncertainty over an outcome-- is often the source of procrastination and delayed action.¹² In the context of union growth and rejuvenization, these insights explain why even willing employees may never join a union (or actively organize) for reasons owing ultimately to the obstacles created by these ‘hard-to-observe’ benefits. Once deflated by these up-front risks, the experiential benefits of unionisation are often outweighed by the benefits of worker delay, costs of organizing effort or opposition from management.

These encumbrances, however, can be mitigated by the presence of an external rule, as exists when a government imposes a legislative ‘standard’ of some kind. For example, in the absence of a common standard, the recent High Definition DVD battle between Toshiba and Sony has prolonged the adoption and purchase of HD DVDs by consumers.¹³ The labour market equivalent of this standard setting would be trade union recognition at a national or industry level as exists in France, or statutory works council rules governing workplace relations as exist in much of continental Europe.

Historical Precedents

Example 1: 1940s Hollywood and the Mainstream Portrayal of Unions

If the discussion above still sounds a bit too abstract, perhaps a historical example can establish the point more concretely. To do so, we need to cast our gaze back 70 years or so to a time when unionism was actually viewed as an important and relevant institution within the mainstream of American society. This was a time when the full assortment of both easy and hard-to-observe union benefits seemed to be recognized by a large portion of American workers, and even, it seems, by some firms.

This attitude is reflected in a number of the popular films of the day. Although there is still controversy surrounding how much of the New Deal's principles actually permeated the films of the 1930s and 1940s and how reformist the Golden Age of Hollywood truly was – with some like John Trumbour¹⁴ maintaining that any progressive tendencies were dwarfed by the individualist and capitalist values maintained by the major Studios – there is no denying that by historical standards, these films capture some of the most overtly solidaristic values ever seen on US screens.¹⁵

One film, in particular, highlights the level of New Deal optimism and multi-dimensional rationale for unionism present in America at the time. The film in question is *The Devil and Miss Jones*, a social comedy which premiered in 1941 and with quite radical undertones by modern day standards.

The plot is deceptively simple. A cantankerous (and highly reclusive) tycoon named John P. Merrick (as portrayed by Charles Coburn) learns that agitators are trying to unionize the downtown department store that he owns. To thwart the organizing drive,

Merrick (whom no one but a handful of attendants has ever seen) goes undercover and takes a menial job as a shoe clerk at his own New York department store. In the course of going undercover, however, he unexpectedly befriends fellow employee Mary Jones (played by Jean Arthur) and her recently fired friend Joe O'Brien (played by Robert Cummings), a labor union organizer. Once Merrick himself is subjected to the humiliating treatment afforded his employees by his very own managers, he starts to understand the origins of workplace unease. As things develop, it is Merrick who ends up spearheading the union drive and establishing a labour-management agreement that promotes the interests of his workers as much as those of himself as owner.

What is remarkable about the film from today's standpoint, however, is its depiction of working life. In particular, the film highlights how common experiences, both inside and outside the workplace, bind department store workers together and help to foster the preconditions for a successful organizing drive. One scene in particular highlights this reality. It begins when the workers meet on the department store's rooftop to discuss what they can do to improve working conditions and also the strategies and tactics needed to set up the union. At this meeting, worried that they may be discovered, they hatch a plan to meet on weekends on the Coney Island beach to solidify their plans. We shall come back to this scene again, as it proves especially relevant when we describe the social trends that seem to be working against unions in the US today, but which at the time of the film, the 1940s, were in harmony with labour organizing and unionism.

That the movie's theme, of a successful union organizing drive helping both labour and management, was not considered so radical in its day is true for several reasons. America was about to enter a war and the home front demanded labour-

Labor History

management cooperation. It was also a film that appeared after that decade long slump – the Great Depression – that had shaken the foundations of unfettered market capitalism in the US. The film also clearly followed on from the precepts of the New Deal. For these reasons and others like it, the film was actually quite universal in its appeal. And this is exactly the question of relevance for North American labour: what happened to that mainstream appeal, where did it go?

We do not need to be reminded of the perilous state of private sector trade union strength in 21st century America. If a picture can tell a thousand words, this one needs very little comment. Notwithstanding the individual successes of many unions and victorious unionisation campaigns such as *Justice for Janitors* in California¹⁶ and the organizing of nearly all the construction service/hospitality sector in Las Vegas by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the American union movement has been unable to reverse a trend that began in the late 1950s. There are now fewer than ten workers out of one-hundred who are organized in the United States, down from more than 30 during unionization's peak in the early-to-mid 1950s.

There are many reasons for this decline, well known to many reading this article, but we prefer to cast our torch on a somewhat less quantifiable cause. If we consider another picture, this time of one that is embossed on our collective conscious, we may come to a better understanding of the social forces at work that may have shaped the fall. The picture in question is of a beach scene with what seems like thousands if not hundreds of thousands of bathers literally occupying every inch of sand. The picture was taken by the American photographer Weegee in the late 1940s on Coney Island. There is an insight in that picture of relevance to unions, and it is the idea that more people did the

same things back in 1948 than they do in 2008. Slightly more people live in New York today than did 60 years ago,¹⁷ yet fewer of them end up doing the same thing by going to the local beaches on a summer weekend. Of the hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers who still head to beaches on summer weekends, many scatter to the Hamptons and the distant zones of the Jersey Shore. Why is this so?

Example 2: The Rise and Fall of Public Swimming Pools in the US

A similar social trend has been discerned in a recent book that examines the life and times of -- of all things -- the Public Pool in America. In the book, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, Jeff Wiltse traces the evolution of municipal pools in America from the late 1860s to today. Focusing on northern cities like Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Louis, Wiltse finds that pools gradually became hotbeds of social interaction and social change. In his words: “Municipal swimming pools were extraordinarily popular during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s....Cities throughout the country built thousands of pools—many of them larger than football fields—and adorned them with sand beaches, concrete decks, and grassy lawns. Tens of millions of Americans flocked to these public resorts to swim, sunbathe, and socialize... In 1933 an extensive survey of Americans' leisure-time activities conducted by the National Recreation Association found that as many people swam frequently as went to the movies frequently”¹⁸.

Otherwise stated, public swimming was as much a part of America as was going to the movies. From the 1920s to the 1950s, municipal pools served as centers for the

community and arenas for public discourse. Hundreds and sometimes thousands of people gathered at these public spaces where the contact was sustained and interactive. In short, community life was fostered at municipal pools. The history of swimming pools reveals changes in the quality of social life and the extent of civic engagement in modern America.

So why did this principal social activity in America largely disappear? The proliferation of private swimming pools after the mid-1950s, according to Wiltse, caused a retreat from public life. Millions of Americans abandoned public pools perhaps because they, in actuality, preferred to pursue their recreational activities within smaller and more socially selective communities. Instead of swimming and interacting with a diverse group of people at municipal pools, private-pool owners secluded themselves into their own backyards. “The consequences have been”, according to Wiltse, “atomized recreation and diminished public discourse”.¹⁹

Unionism and the Facebook Society

Two related questions arise from this discussion and our two historical examples. First, did rising incomes simply reveal the true private preferences of Americans? Or, did public pools offer people an opportunity for social and community interactions, which if reconsidered from a contemporary perspective, would produce different results today versus the 1960s when the switch to the private realm occurred? Alternatively, were the communal activities fostered by the public pool system in America up to the early 1950s

simply the result of being less materially well off, or did they in fact reveal a sense of community that Americans regret having lost?

Whatever the answer, it is no mere coincidence that the period of union ascendancy in America coincided with these other mass social trends. Indeed even the advent of Television offers a similar example. For example, nearly one out of two Americans watched the first episode of *The Honeymooners* in 1955. A show, it should be noted, that depicted the life and times of a lower middle-class (and presumably unionised) New York bus driver portrayed by that every-man actor Jackie Gleason. Today half of all Americans cannot be counted on to vote let alone watch a single television program en masse – not even the Super Bowl commands a fifty percent share of the viewing audience today. Yet, there are more television viewers in 2008 than ever before, but fewer viewers watching any single program. Much like Weegee's Coney Island photo of weekend bathers, Americans have splintered and fragmented into multiple demographic groupings and "social tribes".

Has anything replaced these 'common' activities, and if so what is it? It may sound axiomatic, but balkanized consumer choices are partly to blame for the loss of common cultural activities. Many social historians argue that private (household) consumption and commercialism became the dominant cultural ethos in late twentieth-century America, effectively wiping out all competing public cultures.²⁰ These critics characterize Americans as passive receivers of this consumer culture created and popularized by marketers, movie producers, merchants, and entrepreneurs.

Another argument with a strong family resemblance to this line of reasoning is the idea popularised a decade ago by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone The Collapse*

and Revival of American Community. But whereas Putnam identifies Television as the principal source of decline in shared common experiences and social capital, we have just noted that even at the level of Television program viewing – America is doing less in common today than in the 1950s.

A similar concern has also been echoed about Television's successor technology, the internet.²¹ In *Republic.com*, Cass Sunstein argues that while democratic engagement depends on shared experiences and requires citizens to be exposed to topics and ideas that they would not have otherwise chosen, the Web affords individuals an unprecedented ability to filter out everything that they do not wish to see, hear, or read. With the advent of tailored web platforms that learn more and more about their users, individuals begin to see a narrower scope of daily life. For example, users of Google begin to see only the sports highlights that they previously watched the evening before, read only about the issues that interested them the last time they logged on to the computer, and ultimately begin to encounter only opinions which they agree with.

The remarkable ascendance of the Internet and its wealth of personalized (as opposed to shared) experiences, raises questions, according to Sunstein, about how likely this is to lead to a more active citizenship. In his words, the difference between the newspapers and broadcasters of old, is that despite their static qualities, they nevertheless “helped create a shared culture” and “as their role diminishes and the customization of our communications universe increases, society is in danger of fragmenting, shared communities in danger of dissolving...[and] in their place will arise only louder and ever more extreme echoes of our own voices, our own opinions”.²²

So the same troubling questions persist: How accurate are these latter-day characterizations of American society?²³ Can they really account for the decline in US union membership, much as they explain the fall off in other mass behaviours such as movie watching, public swimming, television watching and recreational bowling?

This is where the second part of our title contains a potential answer to these questions. Facebook is a social networking website that initially allowed people to communicate with their friends and exchange information. Once you become a member of Facebook, you can select to join one or more participating networks, such as an old high school, place of employment, or geographic region. It was launched in 2004 (two years after Sunstein's warnings of a Balkanized internet devoid of common experience) and founded by Mark Zuckerberg, a former Harvard student. Initially the membership was restricted to Harvard students but was subsequently expanded to other Boston area schools and the Ivy League schools within two months. Many individual universities were added in rapid succession over the next year. Eventually, people with any email from across the globe were eligible to join. Networks were then initiated for some large companies. As of October 2008, the website had the largest number of registered users of any social networking site, with over 130 million active members worldwide expected to pass 140 million users by the end of the year (most now coming from non-collegiate and international networks). In just one year, between 2006 and 2007, it increased its ranking from the 60th to the 7th most visited web site (it presently stands at 5th). It was also the number one site for uploading photos in the United States, ahead of public sites such as *Flickr*, with over 14.5 million photos uploaded daily. All this sounds rather impressive, and it is.

Labor History

But it is not unprecedented. There have been similar instances of when millions of people have joined a social network in a relatively short period of time. Indeed, there is one clear historical precedent. If one ventures back to 1930s America, it is the growth in union membership between 1936 and 1946 that clearly stands out and had a similar diffusion curve to that of Facebook. What is it about Facebook that in an era of competing claims on time and interest grows and disperses itself within a population purported to do nothing in ‘unison’ anymore?

For one thing, contrary to generic criticisms of the consumer society, Facebook and other social networking sites are not passive forms of consumption. In fact, they are active in demanding production and attention from their members. Since the introduction of a free Developers API (application programming interface) in August 2006 and then a Facebook programming language in 2007, the platform has enabled users with programming skills to create their own applications. In less than a year, 33,000 applications have been generated by users. This is in part why *Time Magazine* in late 2006 chose its Person of the Year as being “YOU,” namely the users of the internet. This stands in marked contrast to its cover in 1982 where the Computer was chosen as Man of the Year and seated next to the computer was an anonymous form representing a person with few if any active attributes.

The world of information technology has quickly moved from the passive to the active. Facebook is the 21st century equivalent of the public pool or 1940s Coney Island. Union membership, during the high-water mark of its ascendancy in the 1940s and 1950s, benefited from having these contemporaneous forms of common experience upon

which to piggy back. So what is preventing modern unionism from doing the same with Facebook's 130 plus million members?²⁴

The problem is that we don't have a labour market equivalent yet to the facebook society – as we did when the union movement was closely aligned with the social trends of the day and each reinforced each other (e.g., union sponsored bowling leagues).²⁵ The day at the beach spent by the retail workers in the movie *The Devil and Miss Jones* reinforced their solidarity at the workplace. Can a similar model be adopted by North American labour, something which facilitates the drive for voice and better working conditions at work?

At this point it should be emphasised that this is not the same as arguing that unions have to set up their own Facebook pages for workers. Indeed even sophisticated advertisers and companies have found these virtual social spaces hostile to on-line targeting.²⁶ Rather it is about appropriating the same attributes of the Facebook phenomenon and applying them to the 'proposition' that unions offer both workers and (crucially) to firms as well. In this regard there are five attributes in particular that unions can appeal to.

First, Facebook is simple to use and cheap to acquire without being simplistic. Google is much like this as well. That is, you can go back to Google or Facebook and receive different benefits each time without having to re-learn the architecture. Second, there is a common platform that allows for constant evolution but also for tailoring by individuals or groups. Third, low (to non-existent) entry costs exist for Facebook members. There is no real pecuniary penalty to leaving Facebook either, which means you are more likely to try it for the first time. Fourth, 'use-as-you go' systems, like those

Labor History

adopted by Facebook, are quite appealing to new adopters, unsure of the potential benefits and with fears of lock-in. Finally, strong network externalities (so-called bandwagon effects) are a part of Facebook's success, whereby the greater the installed base of users, the greater are the individual benefits to existing members and new adopters looking to join the site.

This list of Facebook society attributes has, we believe, some transfer to the problem of acquiring more trade union members than are lost to attrition. It has been found in work on British union membership decline by that 'loss of membership' has remained constant for close to 30 years in Britain.²⁷ During that time, however, union density reached a plateau and began its steady decline. How can this be?

The overall cause of decline was the growth in 'never membership'.²⁸ That is, persons who entered the labor market post-1980 and who increasingly never had a unionized job. This is a self-reinforcing trend due to many of the reasons alluded to earlier in our depiction of union membership; in particular, the notion of unionism as "experience good". Unionism imparts a number of benefits that are often hard to observe from the outside and the way into membership often has to be learned. Hence, whatever the impulse (the poor labour market conditions of the early 1980s, the anti-union sentiment of workplaces set up after 1960s) for the initial rise in never membership, once the trend started, the social propagation mechanisms began to work against union membership growth.

Conclusion

There are major challenges facing Wagner-style unionism. This is true not only in the US, but anywhere that unions have to organize a workplace and convince employees and firms of unionism's benefits. It becomes difficult to add new members under traditional approaches especially when there is a less supportive social environment that does not readily highlight the positive attributes of unions, especially the union voice attributes that are otherwise hard to observe in the absence of union contact and exposure.

Though we have offered a characterization of a modern social phenomenon that may give unions some hope of attracting millions of new members, unfortunately, we do not know what a new model of unionism, which borrows from the success of Facebook-style social networks, would look like. But we do know that it would have to start looking quite different from the model on offer now, with its focus on stasis rather than growth.

There is also a causal ordering problem at work here. Common choices made by a mass of workers require common experiences, which in turn, create common expectations and tastes. Increased personalised internet use, tailored consumer choice and product differentiation strategies by firms work to balkanize consumer markets. Balkanized consumer markets mean that we are increasingly segmented in our activities outside the workplace. Discussions around the water cooler become increasingly more difficult.

And fragmented consumer choices have a more profound effect than merely raising the cost of explaining what you do outside of work to your colleagues. They also change the nature of work as well. The more segmented we become as consumers and

Labor History

citizens outside of work, the more our work loses commonality. There were once armies of typists and ditch diggers all doing basically the same thing. Today, however, it becomes increasingly hard to find two people doing the same thing inside the workplace, even for workers with the same job titles. Work processes have become as specialised as the products and services employees are obliged to provide. So segmented leisure, consumption and working experiences no longer lend themselves to the ‘communal solutions’ provided by Wagner-style collective bargaining models. Indeed, if one looks at the professions in the US that have actually held their own and even added union members over the past 20 years (e.g., pilots; flight attendants; machinists; teachers; actors and screenwriters; journalists; and nurses) these have been professions in which ‘output’ has remained fairly standard and changed much less over time than for an IT worker, computer engineer or business consultant.

In this paper we do not end with an answer or with a ready made solution to the problems faced by US trade unions. Some, such as Richard Freeman and Joel Rogers, have already tried to imagine this landscape well before the advent of social networking sites such as Facebook, and their efforts can perhaps point the way forward.²⁹ Instead we merely indicate a direction where unions need to look in order to find a supportive social phenomenon upon which to latch onto and also learn from. If Facebook is the equivalent of the Coney Island weekend retreat, then unions need to learn about what brings potential members out to the 21st century beachfront.

References

Bryson, Alex and Rafael Gomez. "Why Have Workers Stopped Joining Unions?" *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Volume 43, no. 1 (March, 2005): 67-92.

Bryson, A. and Gomez, R. "Buying Into Union Membership", in Gospel, H. and Wood, S. (eds.), *Representing Workers: Union Recognition and Membership in Britain*, London: Routledge, 2003: 121-139.

Cross, Gary. "Crowds and Leisure: Thinking Comparatively Across the 20th Century." *Journal of Social History*. Volume 39, no. 3 (2006): 631-650.

Diamond, Wayne J. and Freeman, Richard B. "Will Unionism Prosper in Cyber-Space? The Promise of the Internet for Employee Organization" *NBER Working Paper* No. W8483 (2002).

Erickson, Christopher L., Fisk, Catherine L., Milkman, Ruth, Mitchell, Daniel J.B. and Wong, Kent. "Justice for Janitors in Los Angeles: Lessons from Three Rounds of Negotiations." *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Volume 40 (Spring, 2002): 543-567.

Freeman, Richard B. "From the Webbs to the Web: The Contribution of the Internet to Reviving Union Fortunes" *NBER Working Paper* No. W11298 (2005).

Labor History

Freeman, Richard B., and James L. Medoff. *What Do Unions Do?* New York: Basic Books, 1984.

Freeman, Richard and Joel Rogers. "Open Source Unionism: Beyond Exclusive Collective Bargaining," *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labor and Society* Volume 7, no.2 (2002): 3-4.

Gomez, Rafael and Morley Gunderson. "The Experience-Good Model of Union Membership," In Phanindra V. Wunnava, ed. *The Changing Role of Unions: New Forms of Representation*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004: 93-112.

Hannon, M.T and J. Freeman. "The Ecology of Organizational Mortality: American Labor Unions, 1836-1985" *The American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 94, no. 2, (1988): 25-52.

Kaufman, Bruce. "The Two Faces of Unionism: Implications for Union Growth," In Phanindra V. Wunnava, ed. *The Changing Role of Unions: New Forms of Representation*. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004: 61-92.

Kaufman, B and D. Levine. "An Economic Analysis of Employee Representation," in Bruce Kaufman and Daphne Taras, eds., *Nonunion Employee Representation*. New York: M.E.Sharpe., 2000: 149-175.

Kerr, C. and A. Siegal. "The Interindustry Propensity to Strike," in A. Kernhauser et al. (eds.) *Industrial Conflict*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954.

Knoke, David. *Organizing for Collective Action: The Political Economies of Associations*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, 1990.

Knowles, E. and J. Lynn. *Resistance and Persuasion*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004.

Lary May. "Global Hollywood and the Politics of Nationality". *Diplomatic History* Volume 27, no.5, (November, 2003): 729-733.

_____, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Sunstein, Cass.R. *Republic.com*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002.

Stross, Randall. "Brands Struggle on Facebook". *International Herald Tribune*. Monday, (December 15, 2008): 11

Labor History

Trumpbour, John. *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920-1950*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Willman, Paul, Alex Bryson and Rafael Gomez. "The Long Goodbye: New establishments and the fall of union voice in Britain." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol.18, no. 7, (2007): 1318-1334.

Wiltse, Jeff. *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

Wolfson, Carmelle. "Union Organizing 2.0: Labour enters the Facebook Matrix" *Briarpatch Magazine*, (November, 2008).
<http://briarpatchmagazine.com/2008/11/01/labour-enters-the-facebook-matrix/> (accessed on November 29, 2008).

Zimmer, L. E. *Women Guarding Men*. University of Chicago Press. 1986.

Zittrain, Jonathan. *The Future of the Internet: And How to Stop it*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.

Endnotes

¹ In a recent article about the incident, Blackadder has been quoted as saying that web-based social networking's utility resides in its ability to attract people who are joining workplace-related groups for very practical reasons. See, Wolfson, "Union Organizing 2.0: Labour enters the Facebook Matrix".

² Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet: And How to Stop It?*

³ Ibid.

⁴ This is especially important if their [unions] traditional advantage as guarantors of the union wage premium may be disappearing. Thus, to the extent that this is an easy to observe characteristic for potential members, unions may be losing the one lure into membership that is search-based rather than having to be experienced.

⁵ Our argument is not meant to stand in opposition to the impressive efforts of on-line Labor groups such as Working America <<http://www.workingamerica.org>> one of the first and very effective 'virtual' union networking organizations in the US. Also the early work in this field by Richard Freeman should be recognized, especially as it predated and prefigured in many respects the social-networking phenomenon by several years. See, Diamond and Freeman, "Will Unionism Prosper in Cyber-Space? The Promise of the Internet for Employee Organization"; Freeman and Rogers, "Open Source Unionism: Beyond Exclusive Collective Bargaining"; and Freeman, "From the Webbs to the Web: The Contribution of the Internet to Reviving Union Fortunes".

⁶ See Kaufman, "The Two Faces of Unionism: Implications for Union Growth", 61-92; and Freeman and Medoff, *What Do Unions Do?*

⁷ As with any theoretical characterization that aims at simplifying a complex reality, this is not quite the case. For employees, real benefits are net of subscriptions. For employers the real costs are net of voice benefits plus the potential cost of voice.

⁸ See Willman et al., "The Long Goodbye: new establishments and the fall of union voice in Britain", 1318-1321.

⁹ For more on voice see Kaufman and Levine, "An Economic Analysis of Employee Representation" who spell out a full list of 'voice benefits' in detail and also highlight why private sector firms may under-supply voice.

¹⁰ See Bryson and Gomez "Buying Into Union Membership"; and Gomez and Gunderson, "The Experience-Good Model of Union Membership."

¹¹ In David Knoke's *Organizing for Collective Action: The Political Economies of Associations*, on the political economy of associations, the author explicitly compares unions with other forms of collective association. Although the idea of unions as an 'experience good' is never explicitly invoked, the comparison embraces the experience of membership as well as the structure of organisation and processes.

¹² Knowles and Lynn, *Resistance and Persuasion*.

¹³ It is expected now that Sony has won the next generation DVD standard battle, with its Blu-Ray technology, that faster diffusion of high-definition technology will ensue.

¹⁴ Trumbour, *Selling Hollywood to the World: U.S. and European Struggles for Mastery of the Global Film Industry, 1920-1950*.

¹⁵ May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*.

¹⁶ Erickson et al., "Justice for Janitors in Los Angeles: Lessons from Three Rounds of Negotiations".

¹⁷ New York City's population in the 1950 census was 7,891,957 compared to 8,008,278 in the 2000 (the last official census).

¹⁸ Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* , 25-26.

¹⁹ These arguments are of course nothing new, in particular see "The Goldthorpe Affluent Worker" studies of the 1960s < www.bola.biz/motivation/affluent.html>..

²⁰ Cross, "Crowds and Leisure: Thinking Comparatively Across the 20th Century."

²¹ This, in turn, has created a recent spate of concern over increased societal loneliness as a result of the Internet's encroachment on social life. See Cacioppo and William's *Loneliness*; and Dumm's *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, both reviewed in the weekend edition of *The Wall Street Journal* (29-30 November 2008).

²² Sunstein, *Republic.com*, ix-x.

²³ Any conjecture made about societal change risks the problem of misconstrued generalisations. This problem has spawned something called *Mass Observation* which is a way of recording how society, in this case British, has changed over time. See: <http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>

²⁴ The legitimacy of unions' is an argument that may also be at play here. This argument is central in Hannan and Freeman, "The Ecology of Organizational Mortality: American Labor Unions, 1836-1985" - a thesis on the ecology of unionism whereby selection rather than adaptation drives overall trends in organizational success. In the US, for example, the number of unions peaked before the number of members.

²⁵ The natural union parallel here is the Kerr and Siegal model of strike activity in tight 'occupational communities'. It is well known in the sociology of work that for the development of an occupational sub-culture to occur, there needs to be intense interaction among workers both on and off the job. An excellent example of this can be found in Zimmer's work on female prison guards in the US.

²⁶ Stross, "Brands Struggle on Facebook", 11.

²⁷ See Bryson and Gomez, "Why Have Workers Stopped Joining Unions?", 67-72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 75-85.

²⁹ See Freeman and Rogers, "Open Source Unionism: Beyond Exclusive Collective Bargaining,"; Diamond and Freeman, "Will Unionism Prosper in Cyber-Space? The Promise of the Internet for Employee Organization" ; and Freeman, "From the Webbs to the Web: The Contribution of the Internet to Reviving Union Fortunes".