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WISERD Civil Society: Social Media Research Series

How do Trade Unions use Twitter?

Dr Wil Chivers, 20th February

At the WISERD Cardiff lunchtime seminar on Tuesday 14th February, Dr Wil Chivers reported early findings from his research into trade unions on Twitter.

Back in September I introduced the [Social Media Research Series](#) of blogs here at WISERD and I am now back to kick off the series for 2017.

We are seeking to understand the ways in which trade unions in the UK use social media. At the moment we're looking specifically at Twitter, although there is scope to extend our analysis to Facebook. There isn't a great deal of empirical data about the prevalence and patterns of use of Twitter by trade unions and so our research is aiming to address this shortfall. We are interested, in questions such as:

- How often and what sort of things do unions tweet?
- What can we learn about trade unions from their follower base, their patterns of 'liking' tweets or their use of hashtags?
- What is the potential reach of trade unions' tweets?
- Are there differences between trade unions in their use of Twitter, and what can this tell us about trade unionism and social media more generally?
- What do the social networks surrounding trade unions and their campaigns on Twitter look like?

I've been using two platforms to collect and analyse Twitter data about UK trade unions: [Twitonomy](#) and [NodeXL](#). Twitonomy is a really useful web-based tool for getting insights into the tweeting behaviour of any given account. It also offers analytics on hashtags and keywords that can give you an idea of how they have been used recently, what kind of potential reach they have and who has been influential in promoting them. NodeXL is software that allows social media data to be collected and used for Social Network Analysis. It also has built-in network visualisation functions, which can be used to map out connections and interactions between Twitter users, and the spread of hashtags and other discussions.

By looking at some 'vital statistics' of five prominent unions and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) we can see several similarities and differences emerging. While the picture is subject to change over time, this snapshot from mid-February is a helpful starting point. Figures 1 and 2 below illustrate hashtag use and 'liked' tweets. Hashtag use differs by union. Usdaw, PCS and GMB most frequently tag themselves, while Unite has been promoting awareness of welfare system issues using [#wearealldanielblake](#) and UNISON have been advancing their own campaign thanking public service workers ([#thankyourchampions](#)). There are also some sizeable differences in the volume and frequency of likes across these unions' accounts, which further inspection of tweet content may help to explain. Underlying these figures is the matter of how deliberate any of these behaviours are. Hashtags may be

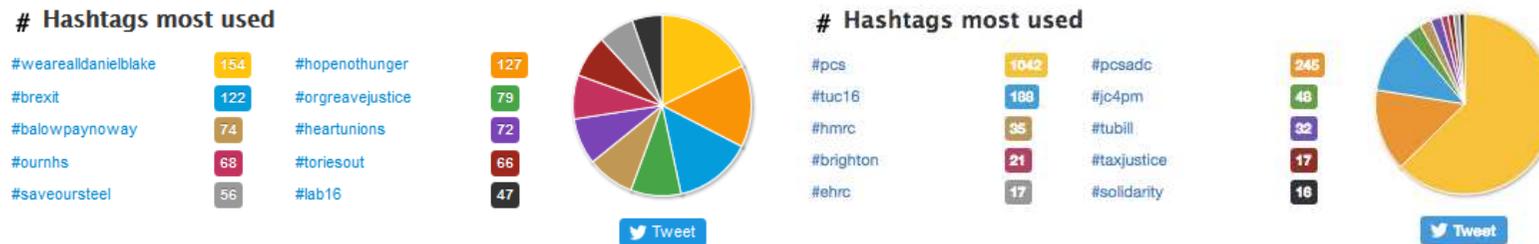
more deliberately planned – as they are frequently attached to campaigns – but liking tweets may be more dependent on the individual(s) responsible for the union Twitter account.

Figure 1: Twitter usage statistics for UK trade union organisations, 13th Feb. 2017

Name	Tweets	Followers	Followed	Likes (last 30 days)	Top Hashtag	Top Retweet
The TUC (@the_tuc)	7,824	18,244	1,222	236 (131)	#brexit (194)	Today more than ever workers need to stand together. Join a union. Protect your rights. (515)
Unite (@unitetheunion)	33,127	52,898	939	681 (19)	#wearealldanielblake (154)	The wrong prescription: Virgin handed contract to run 200 NHS services as Tories sell off health service (Mirror) (226)
UNISON (@unisontweets)	28,297	42,729	2,536	1,934 (>200)	#thankyourchampions (25)	Please share and thank someone working at Christmas #workingatchristmas (179)
PCS (@pcs_union)	19,792	23,944	989	171 (6)	#pcs (1,042)	Every time we've asked for @johnmcdonnellMP's support we've had it. He's the most vocal and active defender of workers' rights we've known (539)
Usdaw (@usdawunion)	7,447	5,760	340	1,282 (12)	#usdaw (488)	Usdaw nominates @owensmith2016 for #LabourLeadership #Owen2016 (131)
GMB (@gmb_union)	3,026	16,307	670	645 (4)	#gmb (188)	The result is in. GMB members endorse @owensmith2016 in the Labour Party leadership contest #LabourLeadership (684)

Follower bases may be indicative of the potential influence and popularity of a union; the largest union, Unite, has the correspondingly largest follower base on Twitter. However, with over 1.38 million members, Unite only has around 4% of that number following them on Twitter. Other civil society organisations of comparable size do not suffer from this disparity and so we can rightly ask what this says about trade unionism on social media.

Figure 2: Hashtag use in the last 3,200 tweets by Unite (left) and PCS (right)



The broad patterns we have identified raise more questions than they answer for the time being, but they do set the scene for us. In the longer term, we will report on any changes over time to the picture seen here. We will also carry out network analysis of some of the hashtagged conversations promoted by unions to identify the extended social networks comprising other organisations and individuals who interact with trade unions on Twitter.

Dr W. Chivers

This blog is the author's own work.

For original post, please see <https://wiserd.ac.uk/about-us/people/wil-chivers>