

# Digital communication as a global challenge for trade unions: Lessons from Brazil and Portugal<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Some of the debates that trouble traditional actors such as trade unions – as entities that have historically struggled in favour of the poor and the disenfranchised (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2013; Hyman, 2016) – relate to technological innovation. The evolution of industry 4.0 (Ictur, 2018; Kagermann *et alli*, 2013; Valenduc & Vendramin, 2016) is a crucial question nowadays, as the processes towards the digitalization of work are based on three points highlighted by Degryse (2016, p. 7): (i) the internet and high speed networks; (ii) huge quantities of data, from commercial, personal and geographic sources (the so-called Big Data) that are incorporated by internet platforms and are available in real time; (iii) the evolution of mobile technologies that have expanded internet access.

In fact, it is within the discussion about the “future of work” (Ryder, 2015) that it is possible to contextualize the impact of technological changes on labour and

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1. This paper benefits from the inputs of two research projects: a) the research project “Rebuilding trade union power in the age of austerity: a review of three sectors” (PTDC/IVC-SOC/3533/2014 - Poci-01-0145-Feder-016808), executed at Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra, between 2016-2019. This project was supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT/MEC) through national funds and is co-financed by Feder through the Operational Programme Competitiveness and Innovation Compete 2020 within the project; b) the PhD project titled “Does labour get online to mobilise young workers offline? A comparative analysis of the relationship of trade union congresses with young workers through the Internet in Europe and the Americas” and supported by FCT/MEC.

employment. This debate includes, among others, the following topics: the role of industries of the future; different types of digital work; the implications of productive automation in the lives of those who work; individualisation processes in the management of working and non-working time; technological unemployment; requirements with regard to new skills; tensions between traditional public service activities and the use of technological platforms (Costa, 2017a:). Beyond the changes to labour relations, it has become necessary to embrace the technologies of globalised networked capitalism (Waterman, 2004) and of the Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) in order to communicate more efficiently and effectively.

As the world of work changes, many scholars and trade union activists believe that the labour movement is going through a crisis of identity and legitimacy (Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2010; Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2014). Much of it has been attributed to the changes to the labour market as a consequence of neoliberal globalisation, but external factors notwithstanding many trade unions have also undergone an institutionalisation process that has weakened the class struggle dynamics of trade unionism. This is reflected, for instance, in the difficulties of effectively reaching the increasing mass of precarious workers (Costa & Estanque, 2019) and in organising workers in the burgeoning digital economy (Degryse, 2016; Vandaele, 2018). But while the current global scenario is challenging, it has also fostered new forms of collective action that can inspire the necessary changes for organised labour to (re)engage meaningfully not only with its membership, but also with potential members and with society at large, and as such, regain its prominence as a social movement.

Our main objective in this article is to draw attention to current trends that challenge the trade union movement's adaptive capacity. We begin with an overview of the Web 2.0 and digital identities. We then consider digital trade unionism as an overarching concept that can contribute to struggle, negotiation and revitalisation of trade unionism in the digital era. Finally, we analyse the use of social media through a mixed-methods, comparative approach, applying social network analysis and content analysis techniques in order to explore the impacts of digital communications on trade union strategies. The empirical analysis focuses on the most representative trade union confederations in Brazil and Portugal.

The Web 2.0 and the new digital context faced by trade unions

Coined by Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty in a brainstorming session for a sector conference, the term Web 2.0 expresses the evolution of the web after the crash of dot-com companies in 2001, which marked the end of the "first era" of widespread

access to the web (O'Reilly, 2005). As we mention elsewhere (Carneiro & Costa, 2020), many other scholars have also highlighted the transformation of the web into a highly communicative network (Castells, 2013; Lupton, 2013; Rogers, 2013) but O'Reilly's denomination caught on. Despite critiques to its theoretical foundations (Fuchs *et al.*, 2010; Han, 2010; Song, 2010), it remains a dominant term to refer to the web as a platform in which user control, participation and collective intelligence are essential features.

As summarised by Fuchs *et al.* (2010, p. 48), the main characteristics of Web 2.0 are:

[...] radical decentralization, radical trust, participation instead of publishing, users as contributors, rich user experience, the long tail, the Web as platform, control of one's own data, remixing data, collective intelligence, attitudes, better software by more users, play, undetermined user behaviour.

Formats include blogs, social networking sites, natively digital search engines, and the many other applications that encourage user interaction. However, as pointed by Song (2010), while from an industry or marketing perspective the Web 2.0 represents a new way of using the internet, from the user-end these new ways are “developing into new social practices and new forms of knowledge exchange” (2010, p. 250). As such, it is not just the technology that makes Web 2.0 so significant, but rather its “normative, or cultural, dimension.” (*Ibidem*). More poignantly, Fuchs *et al.* (2010) defend that the web is a “techno-social network that interlinks humans by making use of global networks of computer networks” (p. 50). Hence, as the evolution of the web has more to do with attitude rather than actual technology, they call for the development of a critical theory of the web and society.

Nowadays, some of people's most important activities online take place on social networks, be it through chats, posts, e-commerce, information sharing or activism. And while social networks connect practically all dimensions of people's lives, they project a high level of autonomy as they are built on personal preferences, that is, users choose how and who they want to interact with (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In addition, “the open and accessible character of the net means that traditional centres of power have less informational and ideational control over their environment than previously” (Dalgren, 2009, in Fowler & Hagar, 2013, p. 204) which allows for more voices to be heard and for different forms of collective action to take place.

However, while some studies recognize the Web 2.0's potential to expose individuals to vast amounts of information, others have pointed to significant limitations (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015), since flows of information depend on how individuals are con-

nected to social networks and – increasingly – on the way algorithms are employed by service providers, such as Google or Facebook (Bakshy *et al.*, 2015; Rogers, 2013).

For instance, in a study about Facebook use in the US, Mitchell and Weisel showed that half (48%) of the people surveyed access political news on Facebook, which is almost as many as those who get such news from local TV (49%) (2014, p. 25). More importantly, users tend to have circles of friends or contacts that reflect their own ideological views. For instance, among users who have declared political positions on Facebook, conservative individuals are “more likely than those in other ideological groups to hear political opinions that are in line with their own views”, with 66% affirming “most of their close friends share their views on government and politics” (2015, p. 2). Likewise, left-leaning users are more likely to “block or ‘unfriend’ someone on a social network... because of politics” (*Ibidem*). This can result in the creation of what Bakshy *et al.* (2015, p. 1130) dubbed “echo chambers”, where “individuals are exposed only to information from like-minded individuals” and “filter bubbles”, in which content selected by the algorithms once again exposes users only to information in line with their views. Since the surprise outcomes of the 2016 UK’s Brexit Referendum, the 2016 American presidential elections and the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving Facebook in 2018, the discussions around privacy, data control and echo chambers have reached a broader audience through political commentary and analysis on mainstream media. In spite of the growing belief that “we live life in the network” (Lazer *et al.*, 2009, p. 721) the transparency of this network and what that represents to attempts to theorize the web must be considered.

Nevertheless, the opportunities for interaction presented by Web 2.0 have undeniably placed it as an intrinsic dimension of people’s lives. “Surfing the net” is no longer a special occasion to seek something different; rather, the web environment has become an ever-familiar space of constant – or near constant – presence, where ordinary activities, from interacting with friends to perusing news, from shopping to dating, take place (Dahlgren, 2013). As the lines between online and offline activities are blurred, the question of how the technological changes discussed above impact the construction of the self comes to fore (Belk, 2013; Bernal, 2012; Rainie & Wellman, 2012).

Bernal defends that online identities need “to be looked on as something more complex than a matter of authentication” (Bernal, 2012, p. 1). Nowadays, an individual’s need to function in the current interactive online scenario in order to fully function in the “real” world has significantly reduced the scope for artificial representations (Belk, 2013; Bernal, 2012). Online identities are now more like extensions of offline selves. In fact, Belk defends that today’s digital realms can be situated within the concept of “third places”, that is, spaces that are “neither the first

place of home nor the second place of work, but at which people hang out, enjoy themselves, and feel accepted” (Belk, 2013, p. 486).

By using the concept of “networked individualism”, Rainie and Wellman argue that recent technological developments have “changed the ways [people] interact with each other. They have become increasingly networked as individuals, rather than embedded in groups. In the world of networked individuals, it is the person who is the focus: not the family, not the work unit, not the neighborhood, and not the social group” (2012, p. 6). Rather than luring people away from offline interaction, Rainie and Wellman associate Internet use with larger and more diverse personal networks.

This new digital context is confronting the collective sense of organization typically associated with traditional actors such as trade unions. It is therefore worth asking: how can traditional trade unionism adapt to the emergence of digital trade unionism? To what extent is the use of social media platforms perceived and applied by trade union confederations? The following section further unpacks these subjects.

#### Digital trade unionism: challenges and opportunities from the unionists’ perspective

The pervasiveness of digital networks has added new pressures on both institutions and individuals, both because it is increasingly difficult to avoid a virtual existence and because it is necessary to understand the infrastructure and the dynamics of digital platforms in order to communicate effectively. As part of an investigation into the challenges of innovation for trade unionism, in-depth interviews with several Portuguese trade union leaders (Costa *et al.*, 2019; Costa *et al.*, 2020; Estanque *et al.*, 2020) captured first-hand perceptions as to whether the introduction of new technologies as a form of union communication has been growing, both internally and externally, and, especially, if new technologies are becoming an important way of attracting new members. The role of social media and any practical results was another aspect analysed. In addition, the interviews sought to assess to what extent the criterion of innovation should not also materialise in the approximation of trade unionism to other non-union actors.

An interview with the general secretary of the European Transport Workers’ Federation (ETF) supports the notion of the internet as inescapable:

A while back, a Greek cruise company told of the case of two young men that went to work on one of their ships and who – within 24 hours, the ship had not even sailed – had already quit because they realised there would be no Internet on board when they left the port. They could not fathom how they would live without Whatsapp or Facebook (Interview, 12/1/2018).

While this anecdote reinforces the importance that young people attribute to online communications, it also points to the potential for organised labour to prioritise digital trade unionism as an institutionalised practice. However, the opportunities presented by such a practice seem to have found more acceptance among scholars and digital industry professionals than among rank-and-file trade unionists (Rego *et al.*, 2016).

One of the pioneers of Internet-based trade unionism was Eric Lee, whose writings and online news service ([www.labourstart.org](http://www.labourstart.org)) were benchmarks in the optimistic current of the earlier days of the Internet that advocated for a “global labournet” that could unite workers across the globe (Lee, 2004, p. 71). Over time, however, the Internet in general, and social media platforms in particular, have become a saturated and fraught space, where various groups and interests dispute the attention of citizens and consumers. As a result of the new challenges in securing a space in the digital realm, Lee’s vision did not fully materialise. Nevertheless, how can trade unionism benefit from the Web 2.0? It has been well documented that the internet has helped organisations to communicate faster and cheaper with broader audiences (Rego *et al.*, 2016). It has also enabled the creation of digital archives for the numerous books, magazines, pamphlets and other materials developed by worker’s organisations around the world since the beginnings of organised labour, therefore securing a valuable historical record. Additionally, the capacity to transmit information in real time, such as reacting to workers’ rights violations, sending out calls for action, or raising awareness of workers’ issues has been invaluable to outreach and mobilisation efforts.

For instance, a former leader of an airport and aviation workers’ union, affirmed that:

Websites increase the ability of trade unions to connect to their members, an aspect that previously depended only on face-to-face interaction... connections were made through the union representative and general meetings, both of which there are less and less nowadays. A good website solves the issue of membership decline, as well as the format and level of communication (Interview 18/1/2018).

As such, the capacity to manage an online presence is essential. As stated by the vice-president of another national trade union for civil aviation workers:

[...] the colours, the lettering, all that matters. We have two members of the board who are between 30 and 35 years of age and who understand the new technologies. They designed the union’s new logo themselves, in partnership with a professional company... they put

together a phone app, there is a fully-functioning Facebook page that everyone likes because the response is almost instantaneous, people ask questions and receive answers right away. It is easier for people to seek clarifications on labour issues or any other issue through Facebook (Interview 18/1/2018).

Another pioneer social movement scholar and activist was the late Peter Waterman, who defended the importance of network linkages to transnational trade unionism (1998; 2004). Inspired by the anti-capitalist globalisation protests in Seattle in 1999 – the first mass protest to rely on the Internet as a main form of decentralised mobilisation – he believed trade unions had (and still have, we add) much to learn from other social movements and organisations that were quick to embrace the digital world, a dimension he thought could enable a “new social unionism”. Such optimism has been faced with a few setbacks. Actually, many of the obstacles to “e-unions” (Darlington, 2004) stem, in large part, from scepticism displayed by trade union leaders with regards to the effectiveness of digital mobilisation. Other challenges include digital illiteracy; the democracy deficit in the workplace, which limits workers’ access to the Internet; language restrictions, as a truly global labour network would require translation services to several idioms; and competing for attention in an increasingly data-driven environment. Simply existing online is no longer enough to get a message across, it has become necessary to continuously create and curate content that is tailored the specific audiences trade unions intend to reach (Carneiro, 2018).

While social media present platforms that ease horizontal interaction among users, they are far from resolving the aforementioned challenges. Specifically regarding Facebook, the national secretary of a trade union for communications and media professionals affirmed in an interview that:

While Facebook is a way of reaching people [especially because we send emails but sometimes there are issues of size and frequency], if you ask me how many responses I have posted on there, I’ll say very few. That is because often a person who is on Facebook and on the Internet will say whatever is on their mind, even if they should not... If I see a person post a question, even when I think it is relevant, I’ll send them a personal message to say ‘hey, your question should not be discussed from behind a screen, my phone number is this or if you prefer tell me where you are and I will come to meet you or call you’. We need some level of personal communication; I don’t like to stay behind the computer screen! (Interview, 14/2/2018).

Nevertheless, the challenges of digital unionism and any solutions to overcome obstacles should be assessed through evidence of the actual impact that digital com-

munications have on the relationship between workers and trade unions, in order to understand what resources are necessary and cost-effective in developing an online strategy. Yet, the high expectations placed on digital trade unionism by the Internet optimists are often confronted with the realisation that many workers' struggles happen on day-to-day situations that require direct intervention. Here, once again we highlight the position of the General Secretary of the ETF, who, despite being an internationalist and a user of digital technologies, when asked about digital trade unionism stated:

The issue of the Internet, blogs, WhatsApp and all that cannot substitute for physical involvement with the workers, for working together with them to learn about their issues. It is curious that there are some trade unions, even Nordic unions that are known for their high levels of unionisation, that come tell us in our meetings that they are learning a new way of working, which is being close to the workers, meeting them outside the workplace, sometimes going to the bars they go to, the places where they live (Interview, 12/1/2018).

The pragmatism in this position indicates that, in spite of the internet consisting of an unavoidable tool for union recruitment and mobilisation strategies, the 'virtual' unionist is still far behind the 'real' unionist (Costa, 2018). Even if the number of trade unions using the web to communicate with members and society at large is increasing across the globe, it would be useful to conduct an Internet census to measure the extent of access by trade unionists, since there are important differences between countries, sectors and unions, as well as different frequencies of Internet use (Rego *et al.*, 2014). The idea would be to verify – as pointed by Eric Lee in the turn of the millennium – if the “number of unionists online is at least at the same level as the unionists in a particular society” (Lee, 2000, p. 14). Moreover, it would be useful to determine the weight of online mobilisation in achieving concrete gains for workers.

To say that “the Internet belongs to everyone” (the title of Lee's seminal book) means to recognise it as an instrument for trade unions to renew themselves and their communication strategies in order to broaden dialogue with organised labour and beyond (Martínez Lucio *et al.*, 2009), should the workers choose to do so. The challenge is convincing workers and unions that it can also be a way to achieve practical results. In this sense, by helping overcome geographical, institutional and class barriers, digital unionism can become an important mechanism for maximising emerging opportunities. For that, it is important that this form of communication is not only embraced as a technical tool, but also as an ethical principle towards more democratic communications. This democratic challenge probably has to start “at home”. In fact, at least in theoretical terms, digital unionism could also be an instigator of the debate

about internal democracy in trade unions by stimulating the approximation between categories of workers, and between different levels of trade union hierarchy

### Trade unions and social media: a comparative analysis of Brazilian and Portuguese trade union confederations

As the boundaries between the virtual and the real become increasingly blurred, the internet offers an entirely different channel for understanding what people are saying, and how they are connecting. Consequently, new research methods have surfaced that propose moving beyond how much of society is online and rather investigating cultural and social transformations through the internet (Rogers, 2013). Based on this concept and informed by the aforementioned interviews, we sought to empirically assess the relationships brokered and the content disseminated by trade union confederations through their online channels, in order to uncover how trade unions leverage digital communications to support outreach.

Although trade unions were slow to embrace new digital technologies, despite varying levels of professionalism, their use is now widespread through websites, online membership applications, social media pages, blogs, videos and petitions. Although a broader comparison has been established elsewhere (Carneiro & Costa, 2020), in this paper we focus on Portuguese-speaking trade union confederations: two from Brazil – Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT) and Força Sindical (FS) – and two from Portugal – Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses-Intersindical Nacional (CGTP-INT) and União Geral de Trabalhadores (UGT).

An initial exercise to map the online presence of the selected trade union confederations shows that the platforms used by trade union confederations vary significantly (Table 1). However, they all went online at around the same period by launching websites between 1997 and 1998. The same was found for the two predominant social media platforms: the four confederations joined Twitter in 2009 and mostly created official Facebook Pages in 2010.

From among the social media platforms, Facebook was selected for further analyses as it was the most consistently used by all organisations – despite them all having Twitter profiles, their use by some confederations was sporadic. Moreover, despite significant differences in general population size, the Facebook penetration rates for the two countries are similar: the number of active personal profiles accounts for 67% of the population in Brazil and 70% in Portugal<sup>2</sup>. Thus, in order to assess

2. Brazil 2020, <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-brazil/2020/06>; Portugal 2020, <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-portugal/2020/06>

the activity of the confederations on social media, network analysis and content analysis were conducted with data retrieved from the main official Facebook Pages of each confederation. A Facebook application called Netvizz (Rieder, 2013) was employed to extract publicly available data (text and metadata from posts, and page likes), with network graphs constructed with the open-source software Gephi and content analysis performed on NVivo 10 software.

TABLE 1  
*Online presence of trade union confederations in Portugal and Brazil*  
*(own construction, data retrieved 01 February 2020)*

	CGTP-IN	UGT	CUT	FS
Website	x	x	x	x
Facebook	x	x	x	x
Twitter	x	x	x	x
YouTube	x	x	x	x
Instagram	-	x	x	-
Blog	-	x	-	-
Flickr	-	x	-	x
LinkedIn	-	x	-	-
Podcast	-	-	x	-

Regarding the network analysis, it is important to clarify that Facebook distinguishes between personal profiles and Pages:

People connect on Facebook using their authentic identities. When people stand behind their opinions and actions with their authentic name and reputation, our community is more accountable. If we discover that you have multiple personal profiles, we may ask you to close the additional profiles. We also remove any profiles that impersonate other people. If you want to create a presence on Facebook for your pet, organisation, favourite film, games character or another purpose, please create a Page instead of a Facebook Profile. Pages can help you conduct business, stay in touch with fans or promote a cause you care about (Facebook, 2017).

As such, the Page of an organisation can be liked by both personal profiles and other pages. Generally, individuals will like or follow pages of organisations, brands or public figures they are interested in. Institutional pages, however, tend to be more strategic in their efforts to build an online presence, and will like other pages for several reasons, such as to show support, to make other organisations aware of

theirs and increase reach, to monitor and share content, and to show visitors what other pages are aligned with their values or interests. Hence, the networks were constructed at the institutional level, that is, restricted to links established between Pages (Carneiro, 2018).

Besides the institutional networks within which the trade union confederations are placed, assessing the types of content they disseminate across Facebook also sheds light on the narratives constructed by organised labour. While a presence on social media is almost inescapable for any organisation that wishes to secure a level of visibility these days, if this presence does not effectively leverage on the platforms' affordances to connect with the intended audiences, it is easy to go unnoticed in the masses of information that make up Facebook. Based on the theoretical foundations of descriptive content analysis (Holsti, 1968; Herring, 2009; Krippendorff, 2013) a platform-specific conceptual framework was designed in order to systematically and objectively identify the characteristics of a sample of posts from the four trade union confederations (Carneiro & Costa, 2020). The table below describes the analytical categories, which were divided into mutually exclusive case coding indicators that characterise the posts, and thematic coding indicators that describe their subject focus. The sample for this analysis was drawn from randomly selected months, consisting of all posts from January 2016, February 2017 and October 2018, for a total of 428 individual posts: 72 from CUT, 101 from FS, 130 from CGTP, and 125 from UGT.

TABLE 2  
*Content analysis analytical categories*

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
<i>Case coding</i>	
<i>Post feature</i>	Posts were coded against an exhaustive list of the types of content that can be disseminated on Facebook such as text, links, photos, videos, illustrations, text over background, memes, GIFs, infographics, petitions, audios, and events.
<i>Feature source</i>	Indication of where the content originated from. Possible sources of featured content included own content (i.e. website, other social media profiles, etc.), other labor organizations, civil society, government, media, private sector, and international organizations.
<i>Tone</i>	Posts were coded as "informative" when they simply relayed information; as "mobilizing" when they included a call to action; "positioning" when they were authored by or included statements from the confederations' leadership; "solidarity" when they indicated support for an action or cause; "celebratory" when they praised an achievement or celebrated commemorative dates.
<i>Original text</i>	Did the text box contain anything, or was the post just sharing content without any original message/commentary by the confederation?
<i>Tag (Y/N)</i>	Did the post include a tag for another page or profile?
<i>Thematic coding</i>	

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION
<i>Union issues</i>	Topics directly related to union activities such as strikes, demonstrations, collective bargaining, meetings, services, etc.
<i>Labour issues</i>	Topics directly linked to the traditional labor agenda, such as wages, worker’s rights, health and safety, pensions, and others.
<i>Broader issues</i>	Broader themes not specifically about labour or trade union activity, but which represent a wider agenda of issues that indirectly affect the world of work, such as human rights, immigration, climate change, trade, etc.
<i>Interest groups</i>	If a post mentioned or was intended for a specific segment of the population, like women, young people, immigrants, minorities, etc.

Source: Carneiro & Costa, 2020.

### Results: assessing the social media activity of trade union confederations

Table 3 summarises basic Page metrics for the four trade union confederations assessed, according to the two dates of data retrieval. Overall, the Brazilian CUT was visibly more active on Facebook than its counterparts, posting several times a day, whereas the other confederations present a much lower level of activity. This difference could be due to a clearer strategy by the CUT to amplify its discourse on digital platforms, as this Brazilian confederation has often been associated with the concepts of “social movement unionism” and “new social unionism” (Costa, 2015; Waterman, 2004).

TABLE 3  
*Official Facebook pages of trade union confederations in Brazil and Portugal*

	<i>Pages liked*</i>	<i>Post activity**</i>	<i>Likes received**</i>
CUT (BR)	107	0,51	211,386
FS (BR)	116	0,08	112,528
CGTP-IN (PT)	19	0,13	25,856
UGT (PT)	50	0,07	5,016

Notes: \*Data retrieved 08 October, 2018; \*\*Data retrieved 01 July 2020; “Post activity” is a metric provided by Facebook that calculates the number of posts per hour, based on the last 50 posts.

Nevertheless, considering that Brazil has approximately 13 million unionised workers, and Portugal has about 560 thousand (Visser, 2019), these figures highlight that all four organizations have a limited number of followers given the potential population just within the labour movement. Taking CUT again as an example, the confederation represents 61% of Brazil’s unionised workers (Visser, 2019) – that is, almost eight million people. As such, if every follower of its official Page represented an individual member, the number of likes would constitute only 2.7%

of this membership. In the case of Portugal's largest confederation, the CGTP, this figure doubles to 6.5%. However, as it is known that likes on Facebook Pages do not correspond to individual people, and can include other institutional accounts, as discussed previously, this poses a question with regards to the representativeness of Facebook followers versus the dedication and the resources required to maximise the reach of social networks as part of broader communications and outreach efforts.

The visualisations of the page like networks for the four trade union confederations also reveal interesting insights about the level of engagement of these organisations with others on Facebook, with results that could reflect an offline reality as well. Figures 1 to 4 below present directed graphs, with Facebook Pages as the nodes and the connections between nodes (edges) made when a page likes another. As the trade union confederations are the central element in the networks, they are necessarily connected to all the other nodes and there are no isolated components; it is also possible to see where the other pages like one another.

In all of the graphs, five major groups are evident: Facebook Pages directly related to the trade union confederation itself (ie. regional offices, sub-committees or campaigns that have individual pages), trade unions and labour-related organisations (regardless of affiliation to that particular confederation), civil society organisations, media organisations (which encompass both mainstream/commercial media and alternative media) and government bodies. The nodes were colour coded according to these clusters and the edges were coloured to match their node source.

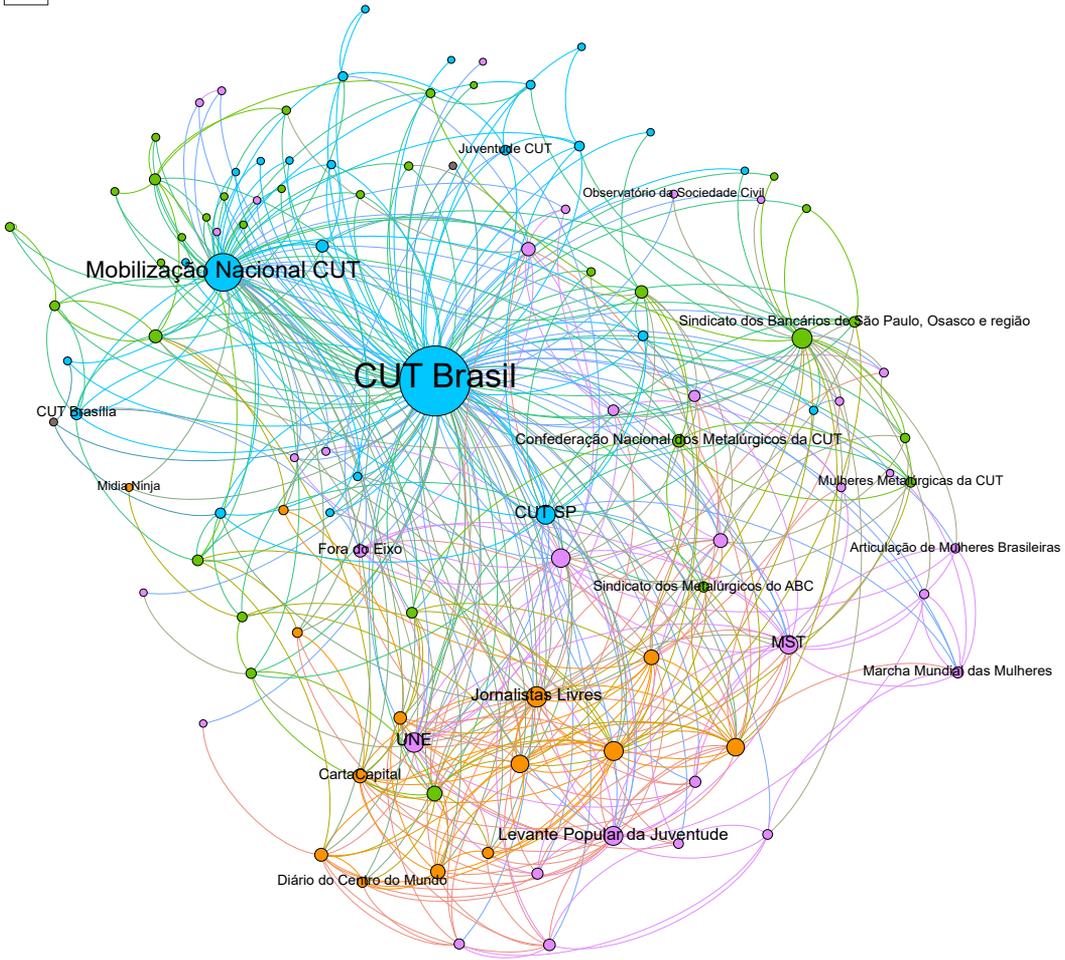
What the blue and pink clusters show is that the majority of Pages followed by these trade union confederations are related to the labour movement, be them trade unions or their own regional offices and campaigns. That is ostensibly the case for the Portuguese confederations, as 84% of UGT's likes are either trade unions or its own Pages, with CGTP-IN slightly behind at 80%. Neither organisation likes any media pages, and CGTP-IN only likes three civil society pages. The Brazilian confederations have less homogeneous networks but are still mostly concentrated around the labour movement: blue and pink nodes represent 56% of CUT's likes, and 49% of FS'. Again, this may be a reflection of the 'social movement unionism' advocated by Brazilian trade unions, which has as one of its tenets broadening the scope of trade union action to link labour causes to other social justice agendas and to dialogue with institutions beyond organised labour.

Results from the content analysis reveal that all four organisations focus their efforts in either sharing their own content – that is, posting links to articles or information from their own webpages – or sharing external links, often without any analysis, commentary, calls to action or encouragement of dialogue. In sum, they rely on Facebook mostly to relay information, rather than to seek interaction.

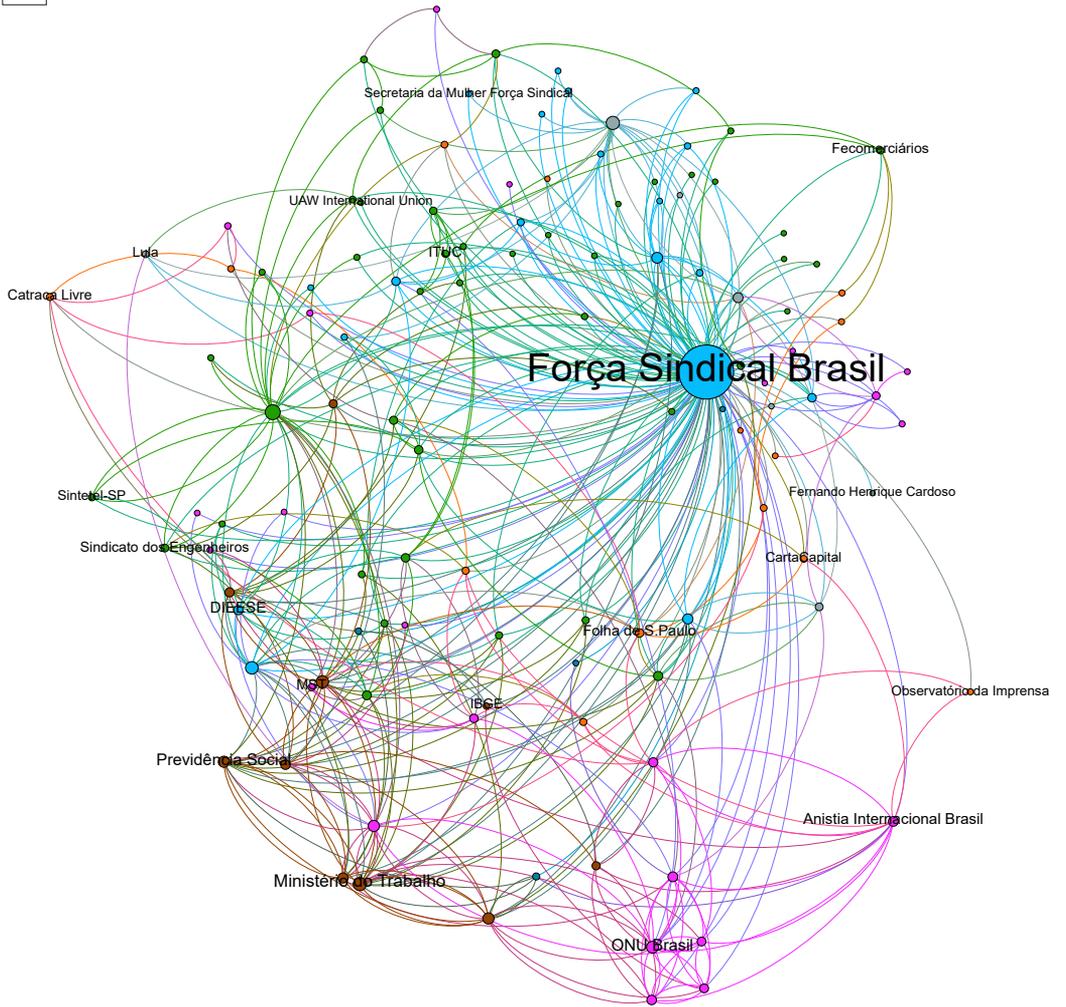
FIGURES 1-4

Network visualisations of the four trade union confederations, where blue nodes and edges represent Facebook Pages directly related to the trade union confederation; green represents other trade unions and labour organisations; pink represents civil society organisations; orange represents media outlets; and brown represents government institutions.

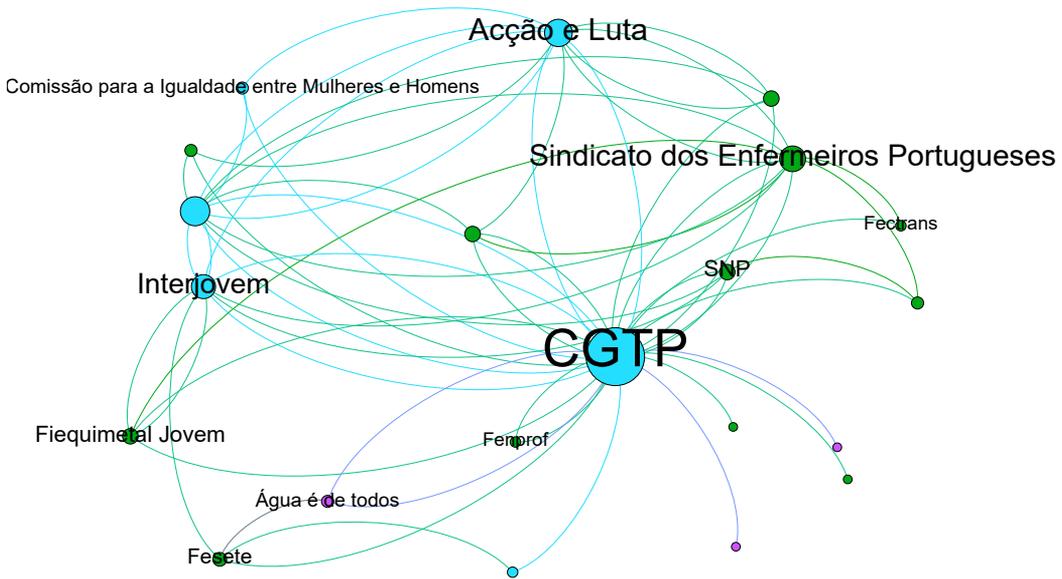
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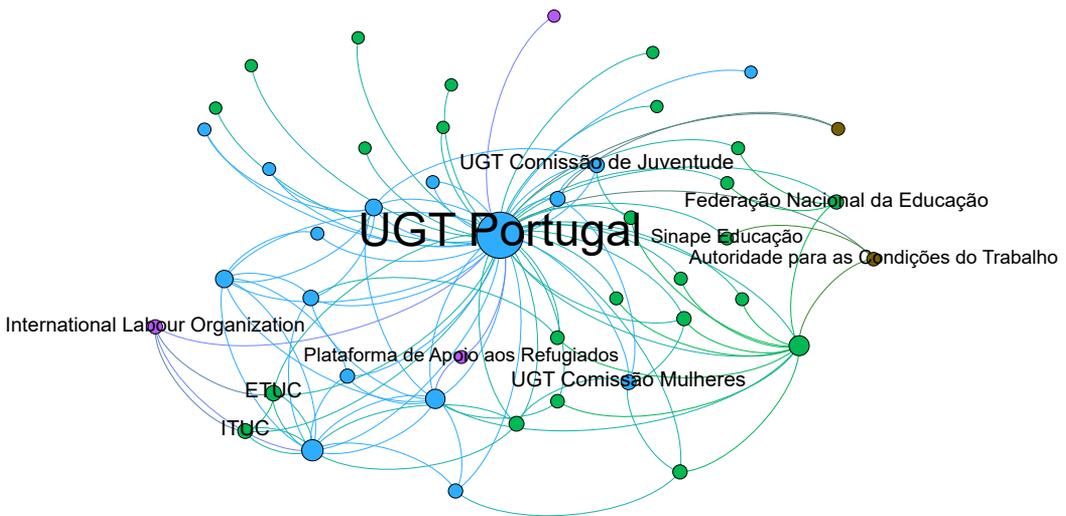


FIGURE 5  
Types of content featured on the Facebook Pages of the confederations (%).

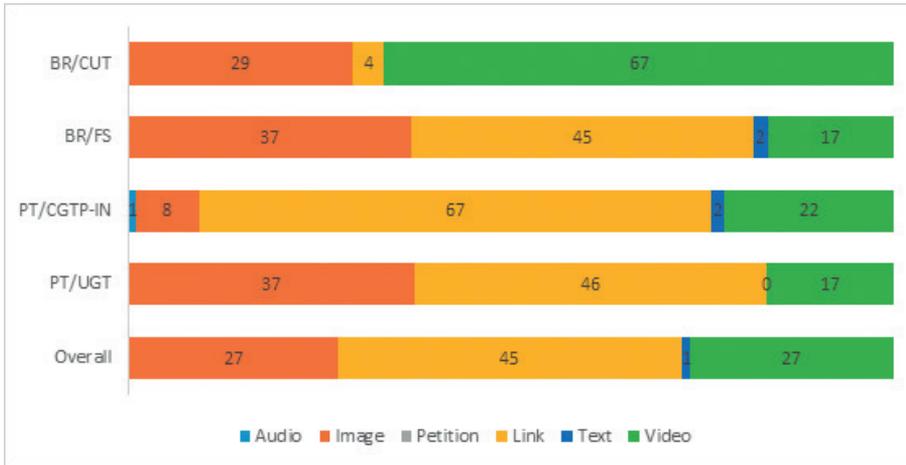


FIGURE 6  
Sources of content featured on the Facebook Pages of the confederations (%).

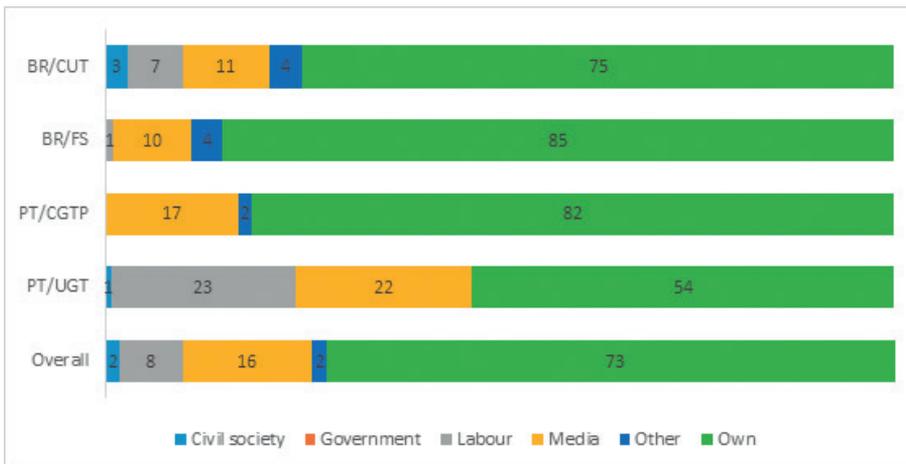


Figure 5 below shows that, overall, nearly half the posts featured links to external websites (45%), followed by videos or images (both present in 27% of posts). The CGTP was the confederation that featured links most frequently, CUT ostensibly relied on video posts. As for the sources of the information shared (Figure 6), almost three quarters of the posts included content from the confederations' own channels, such as their websites or campaign microsites. The media was the second most prevalent source of information, as 16% of the content disseminated through the pages of the confederations featured articles or videos from major news outlets. The UGT was the only confederation to share a significant amount of content from

FIGURE 7  
Tone of posts on the Facebook Pages of the confederations (%).

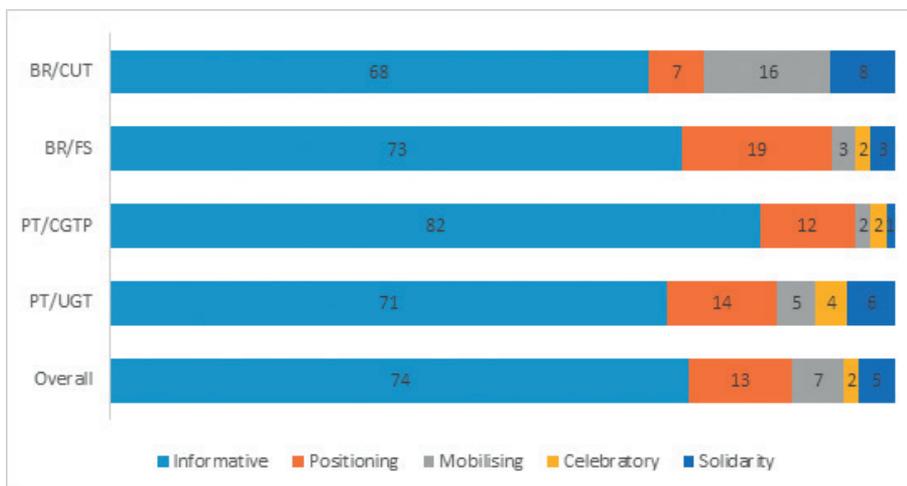
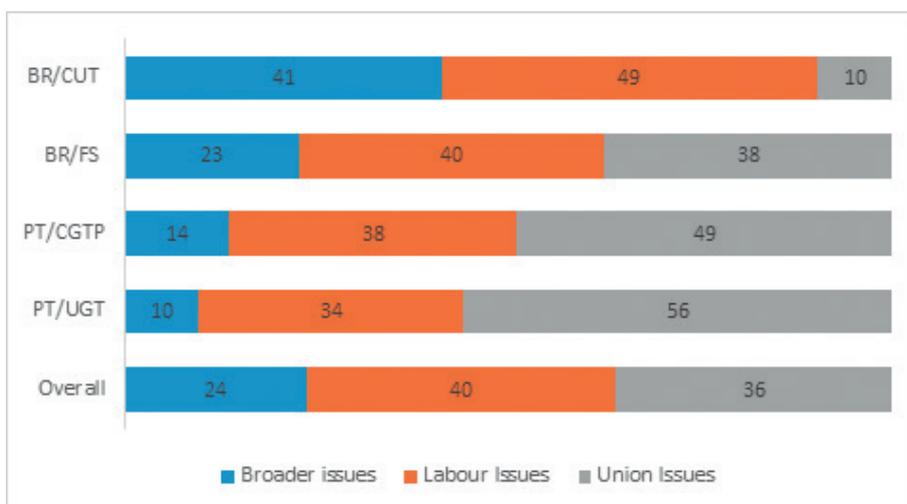


FIGURE 8  
Frequency of overarching themes of posts on official Facebook Pages (%).

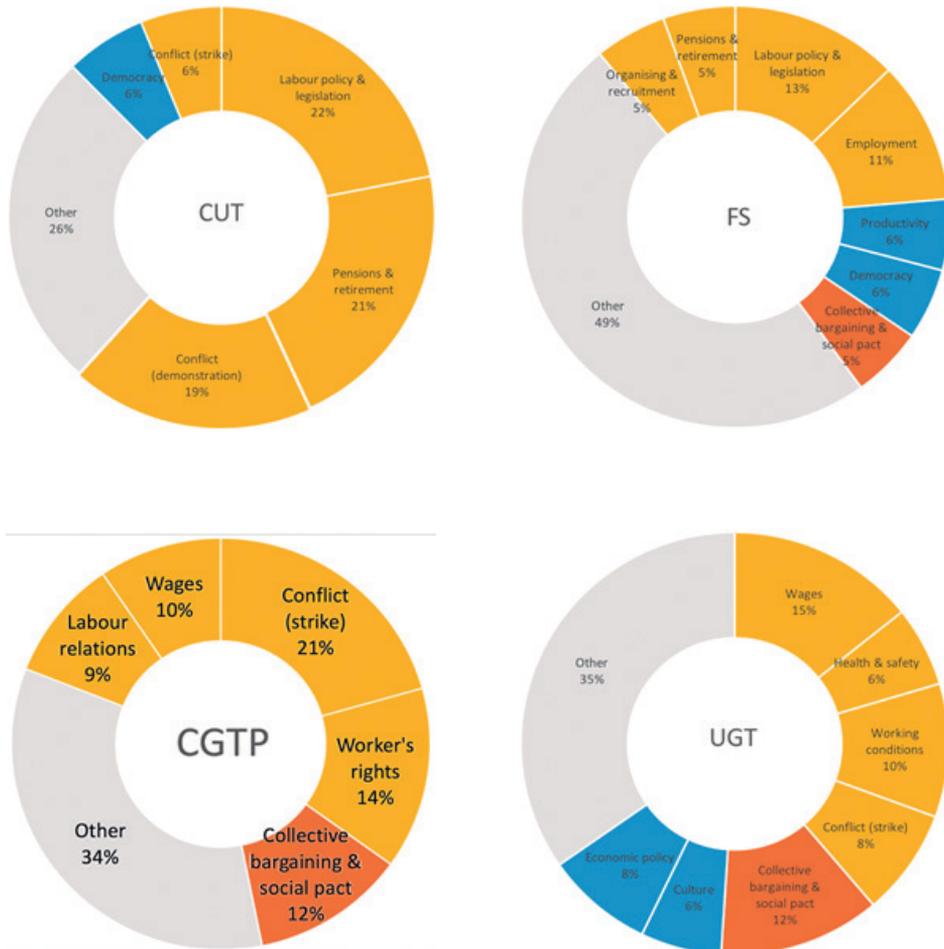


other labour organisations, while non-labour civil society organisations were virtually absent in the analysis.

Figure 7 below quantifies the tone of the posts, that is, whether they are intended to inform or mobilise page followers, if they express an opinion, stand in solidarity with other struggles, or contain information about achievements faced by the confederations or other relevant actors. As shown, among the four confederations, 74% of the posts aimed to inform and raise awareness of issues the confederations consider pertinent to themselves and their audience. Mobilisation messages made up

FIGURE 9

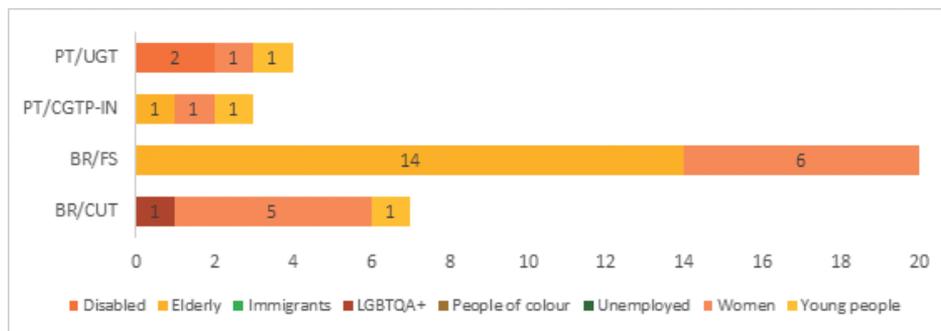
*Prevalent topics by confederation, where orange represents trade union issues, yellow represents labour issues and blue represents broader issues (%).*



less than a tenth of the posts. The two Portuguese confederations and the Brazilian FS have a strong focus on descriptive/neutral information sharing, with few posts calling on followers to take any action, taking a stance on something, or expressing solidarity with workers' struggles or other causes. CUT was the confederation that most frequently encouraged followers to act on issues, likely a result of CUT's strong mobilization against the impeachment process for ex-president Dilma Roussef, which was a key topic during the period of analysis.

Besides the characterisation of the posts, the content analysis enabled an assessment of the themes that the trade union confederations post about. Figure 8 shows that a significant majority of posts were about labour-related issues. Just under a

FIGURE 10  
*Frequency of posts targeting special interest groups (#).*



quarter of posts addressed a broader agenda. Union issues accounted for 36% of posts, though that may be explained by the fact that trade union confederations normally operate at the institutional and advocacy levels, so its governance and accountability processes differ from trade unions. The Portuguese confederations were the most focused on these processes, while the Brazilian confederations gave more space for issues-based communication, with CUT’s focus clearly branching out from the traditional labour agenda and into broader issues affecting Brazilian society.

With regards to the specific sub-themes addressed by the confederations in the period analysed, Figure 9 illustrates the most frequent topics for each organisation, with the colours representing the three overarching themes. Themes vary greatly among the confederations, as there is not a single theme recurrent within the top mentions in all four. However, the graphs clearly show the tendency of trade union confederations to focus on traditional labour issues, rather than expand their narratives to embrace a broader social and environmental justice agenda and make a connection between those themes and the world of work.

Lastly, in terms of content directed to specific audiences – especially considering those “hard to reach” groups such as young people, migrants and minorities – Figure 10 shows that trade union confederations are not attempting to address them directly, with the exception of posts related to women’s issues such as harassment in the workplace, childcare or equal pay, or topics related to pensions, which target older workers. In the sample analysed, no confederation posted about issues of interest to people of colour, immigrants or the unemployed.

## Conclusion

The digital age confronts us with a diversity of concepts and ideas that range from individual experiences (of autonomy and/or hybridisation of the virtual/real), to

transformations in social relations both online and offline (Web 2.0 as a platform for two-way communication; Industry 4.0 as a possible path for labour relations). Within this context – and especially as the global pandemic’s restrictions on movement have moved social relations into increasingly digitised environments – the use of Internet presents a significant opportunity for trade union renewal as a platform for outreach, advocacy and the strengthening of networks. But so far, the findings of our investigation corroborate other research on this matter (Hodder & Houghton, 2015; Rego *et al.*, 2016; Haake, 2017) that indicate that despite the widespread use of digital communications by trade unions, there is still a long way to go in terms of fundamentally changing the way they communicate.

Our analysis of the official Facebook Pages of four trade union confederations in Portugal and Brazil provide three key insights for unionists:

1. Trade union confederations reach a limited audience on social media, as shown by the reduced number of followers given the potential population just within the labour movement.
2. Their institutional networks are restricted to organisations within their immediate sphere of influence, thus enforcing an ‘echo chamber’ and hindering possibilities for outreach and alliance-building.
3. They maintain an outdated “one-way” model of online communication, using Facebook mostly to relay information rather than taking advantage of the interactive characteristics of social media and the opportunity for horizontal dialogue.

As much of the discussion about the future of trade unionism is centred on developing alliances with diverse social movements to defend a broader social justice agenda, connecting labour issues with other causes, and, on a practical level, organising hard to reach workers, such as those with atypical and precarious contracts (Bernaciak, Gumbrell-McCormick & Hyman, 2014), at least on social media, organised labour may be missing out on expanding their influence. To stand out in a virtual world saturated with information, the ability to be creative, to tell stories that foster connections, and to move beyond top-down communication paradigms are essential approaches.

As examples, Internet and social media strategies by the Union Solidarity International (USI), a UK-based organisation that aims to support international solidarity between trade unions and other worker movements, has been successful in developing an audience in English-speaking countries (Geelan & Hodder, 2017). Workers in the emerging platform economy, such as couriers, are also increasingly harnessing the ability to communicate and connect through social media in order to “forge a

shared identity, trust and solidarity, to announce local direct action and to attract media attention” (Vandaele, 2018, p. 16).

Bringing together the theoretical and empirical contributions of our research, we conclude that the ability to embrace the tools and concepts of the digital era are crucial for trade unions and for unionists to face the future of work, its new context and communication mechanisms. But while incorporating digital unionism in day-to-day trade union activity is a basic assumption, it nevertheless confronts two realities: that of the opportunities generated by new information and communication technologies, versus the “physical” struggles and needs of workers (even when the “physical” may now happen online as well). As a consequence, digital trade unionism is far from being the generator of a “common culture” shared by workers of all kinds; rather, it can be a conflictuous space in which there is no consensus in terms of strategies and expectations.

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### **Abstract**

*Digital communication as a global challenge for trade unions: lessons from Brazil and Portugal*

As a cross-cutting issue encompassing all of society, the evolution of digital technologies is particularly challenging to traditional labour actors that are accustomed to physical work and face-to-face contact. This article discusses the distinctive possibilities of social media use as a forward-thinking global strategy for organised labour. After an initial clarification of useful concepts to consider in the digital age, we focus on the social media presence of trade unions, identifying the pros and cons associated with platform-based communication. Finally, the article debates the implications of social media platforms as tools to strengthen networks with non-union actors and contribute to the amplification of the labour agenda. Through a comparative analysis of four trade union confederations, two from Brazil and two from Portugal, we argue

that, despite the possibilities for outreach and interaction enabled by the new communication and information technologies, trade union confederations maintain constricted networks and an outdated top-down communications model.

Keywords: Digital communication; Trade unionism; Facebook; Brazil; Portugal.

### Resumo

*A comunicação digital como desafio global para os sindicatos: lições do Brasil e de Portugal*

Enquanto questão transversal a toda a sociedade, a evolução das tecnologias digitais é particularmente desafiadora para os atores tradicionais do mundo do trabalho que, por sinal, estão acostumados ao trabalho em formato presencial próprios dos contatos face a face. Este artigo discute as possibilidades distintas do uso das redes sociais como uma estratégia global de vanguarda para o trabalho organizado. Após um esclarecimento inicial de conceitos úteis a ter em conta na era digital, nós nos concentramos na presença dos sindicatos nas redes sociais, identificando os prós e os contras associados à comunicação baseada na utilização de plataformas digitais. Por fim, o artigo debate as implicações das plataformas sociais enquanto ferramentas para fortalecer redes com atores não sindicais e contribuir para a ampliação da agenda trabalhista. Por meio de uma análise comparativa de quatro confederações sindicais, duas do Brasil e duas de Portugal, argumentamos que, apesar das possibilidades de alcance e interação facultadas pelas novas tecnologias de comunicação e informação, as confederações sindicais mantêm redes restritas e um desatualizado modelo de comunicação de “cima para baixo”.

Palavras-chave: Comunicação digital; Sindicalismo; Facebook; Brasil; Portugal.

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