

ETUI Policy Brief

European Economic, Employment and Social Policy

N° 7/2018

The untapped possibilities of YouTube as a trade union tool

Jenny Jansson and Katrin Uba

Jenny Jansson is a researcher in the Department of Government, Uppsala University and at the Institute for Social Movements, Ruhr University Bochum. Katrin Uba is Associate Professor in the Department of Government, Uppsala University.

Key points

- A majority of the trade union confederations in the European Union (EU), Switzerland and Norway use YouTube actively; 80 confederations have uploaded more than 13,000 videos between 2007 and 2016. On average, this accounts for just over one video per month and about 2,000 videos per year.
- Unions' YouTube videos differ greatly in length and popularity, ranging from 3 seconds to 10 hours, and from 0 to 860,000 views and up to 3,000 likes.
- There are at least two broad types of uploaded videos: videos supporting political campaigns and union activism and informative videos about union activities (such as congresses) or about particular professions.
- Due to its huge young audience, YouTube offers great potential for unions to reach groups that have traditionally been difficult to organise, but as of yet only a few unions seem to be using YouTube effectively.
- In the context of information overload on the internet, videos with a political message or professional-standard production are the most likely to go viral.

Introduction

Social media has quickly become an indispensable communication tool for organisations. Founded in 2005, YouTube is today one of the most used social media platforms. It has over one billion users who watch more than 6 billion hours of videos every month worldwide.¹ Most YouTube users are young and male.² While the typical YouTube user just watches videos, many communities actively participate in content production (uploading videos) and are commenting, sharing, 'liking', and 'disliking' videos. It has been calculated that over 500 hours of videos are uploaded every minute on YouTube. The platform has moreover become an important medium for so-called social media influencers: 'YouTubers' are persons who, more or less, professionally generate content with different purposes on social media. Although YouTube is mainly used for entertainment – for watching music videos, TV series, and films – many users also look for informational and instructional videos (Khan 2017). The platform should thus be of interest to any organisation aiming to reach large audiences and especially those which have difficulties in attracting young people, such as trade unions. An effective use of YouTube could facilitate the engagement of existing and potential (particularly young) union members.

While scholars have looked at unions' use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the videos uploaded to YouTube by trade unions have rarely been studied (a couple of exceptions are Panagiotopoulos and Barnett 2015, and Upchurch and Grassman 2015). Based on a systematic analysis of about 13,000 YouTube videos uploaded by trade union confederations in 26 European countries³ and 4,500 videos uploaded by Swedish trade unions, both during the period 2007 to 2016, this policy brief demonstrates that YouTube videos are a familiar and frequently used medium for the labour movement. For each uploaded video, we have examined information regarding the title, description, length and the number of likes and dislikes given by YouTube users. This metadata of the videos shows that YouTube is used by union confederations in a

3 We listed 80 confederations in these countries and found that 68 per cent of these confederations have one or more YouTube channels.

1 YouTube Facts and Statistics, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/press/>

2 YouTube Facts, June 2017, <https://filmora.wondershare.com/youtube-video-editing/mind-blowing-youtube-stats-facts-2017.html>

variety of ways. The results reveal that there is an argument to be made for unions using YouTube to become more visible among one of the least unionised groups – young people, i.e. the typical YouTube audience – and also that videos which are professionally made or carry a political message are more likely to go viral.

YouTube videos: a familiar medium

Trade unions have been using film since the 1920s, one prominent example being *Brüder* (1929) by Werner Hochbaum, and it has been claimed that film became ‘the medium of the working class’ in the 1930s (Wring 2005). In contrast to newsletters or articles, films do not need to carry any verbal messages, therefore offering the possibility of overcoming language barriers. Just like these ‘old-fashioned’ films, union videos uploaded to YouTube aim to agitate, educate, disseminate information and encourage political activism. But this new platform also provides more opportunities than showing films in the cinema: the audience can directly comment on the video and share it with other users, and the owners of a YouTube channel can easily collect detailed statistics about their audience (e.g. age group and gender of viewers).

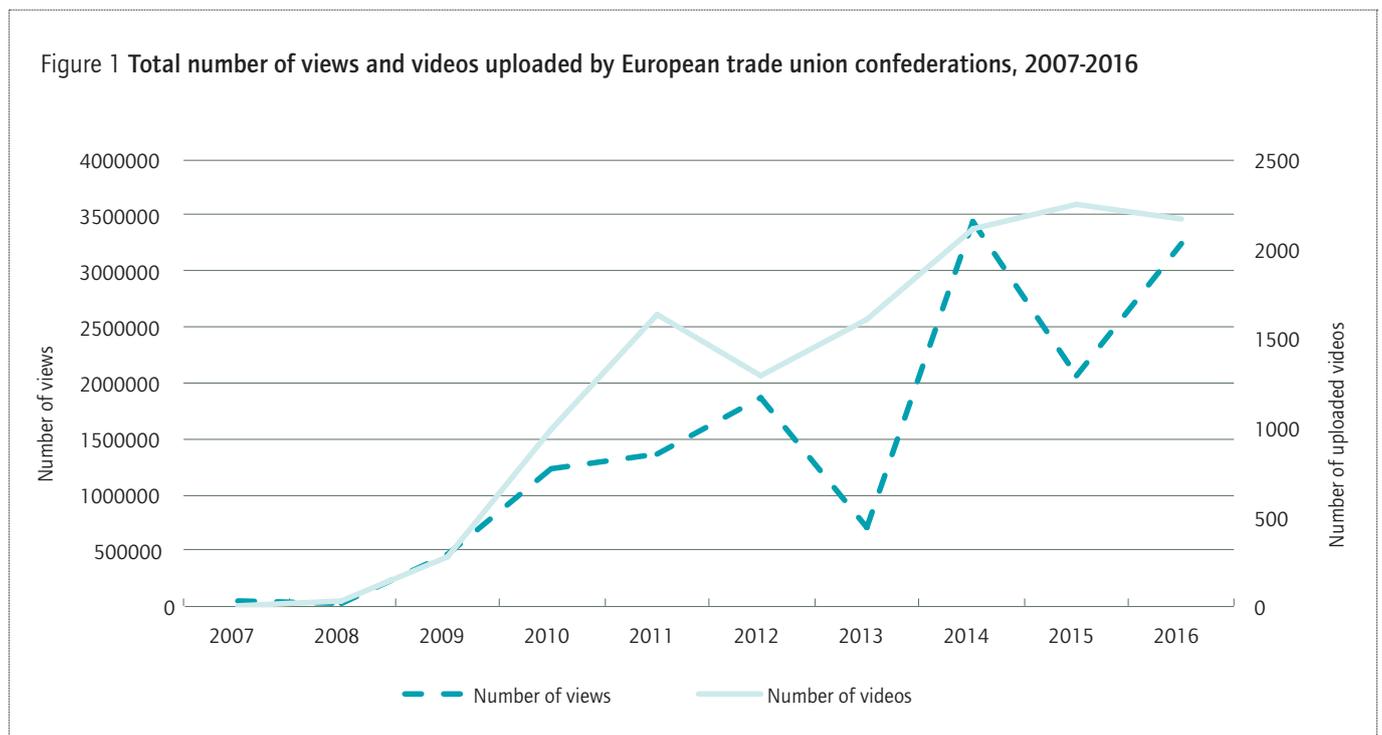
In comparison to other social media platforms, videos on YouTube have no limits on length; Twitter, for example, only allows 280 characters. Producing videos takes much more time and resources than posting updates on Facebook or Twitter, a task often done by a single official handling the union’s social media accounts. Film production is rarely a ‘one-man job’ (Barber 2015), and the content of videos is usually discussed by a production team. This production process should thus ideally become part of unions’ longer-term communication strategies.

Evident use of videos by union confederations across Europe

In order to demonstrate the varying degrees of use of YouTube videos by unions in Europe, we describe the broadcast reach (number of views), popularity and length of more than 13,000 videos uploaded by trade union confederations from 26 countries. Popularity is measured by combining the number of views with the balance of likes and dislikes the video has accumulated over the years. Considering the typically young audience of YouTube, we assume that more popular videos are more likely to be viewed by this group.

Cross-country variation in broadcast reach and length

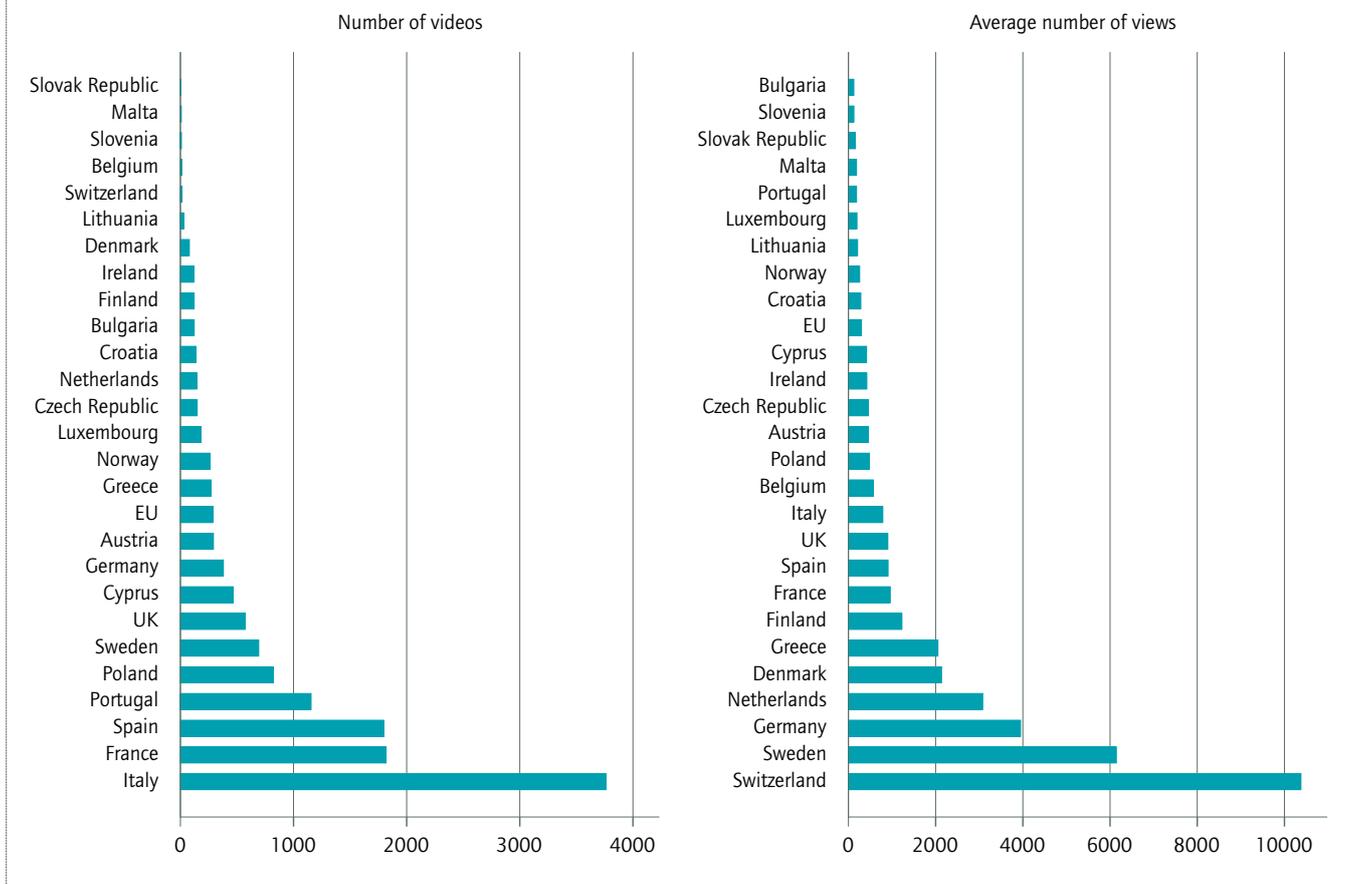
Figure 1 shows an almost continuous rise in the number of YouTube videos uploaded by trade union confederations in Europe and in the number of views since 2007. Figure 2, meanwhile, demonstrates that there is a significant cross-country variation in the broadcast reach of YouTube videos uploaded by the confederations. While Italian confederations have uploaded the largest number of videos to YouTube in our sample, it is the 14 videos from Switzerland which have been viewed the most: on average, 10,378 times. Although only producing a very small number, the Swiss union confederation seems to make videos that receive plenty of attention, perhaps because they have developed efficient ways of sharing them. Their most viewed video⁴ is a professional, graphical presentation of the unequal distribution of wealth in the country.



Source: Jansson and Uba (2018).

4 “Die Wahrheit über die Vermögensverteilung in der Schweiz” by Schweizerischer Gewerkschaftsbund, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNgydq7wec>

Figure 2 Number of videos and average number of views per country, 2007-2016



Source: Jansson and Uba (2018).

A systematic analysis of the metadata of union videos reveals that the length of the uploaded videos ranges from two seconds to ten hours. The latter example, uploaded by Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö (Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions), is footage of a day-long congress meeting. Short videos often relate to political campaigns. The typical video uploaded by the union confederations lasts nine minutes, has been viewed 1,168 times and has received about three likes. There is no correlation between the length of the video and the number of views, likes or dislikes.

Popularity measured by views

The video with the largest number of views in our sample, 'Like a Swede (a way of living)',⁵ was produced by Tjänstemännens centralorganisation (TCO), the Swedish Confederation of Professional Employees. It has received over 800,000 views. The second most viewed video, 'Business like a Swede',⁶ was produced by the same organisation and has been watched 790,000 times. Both videos are professionally made commercials (the latter has the format of a music video) and both describe the benefits of the Swedish welfare state, such as parental leave, pensions, annual leave and so on. The fact that both videos are in English makes the potential audience a lot larger and probably explains the high number of views.

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hJ_qHiGo754
 6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcvOKPTS7AU>

The third most viewed video in our sample, with more than 680,000 views, is completely different. It is a campaign video produced for the workplace elections in small businesses that took place in France in 2012 and it was uploaded by the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (French Democratic Confederation of Labour).⁷ Similarly, the fourth most viewed video, 'La Carta dei Diritti Universali del Lavoro',⁸ produced by the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (Italian General Confederation of Labour), with almost 600,000 views, promotes a petition in favour of a specific legislative proposal concerning labour rights. Both these videos have a more direct political message than the promotion of general political ideas seen in 'Like a Swede'.

Popularity measured by 'likes'

While the number of views is the best measure for the broadcast reach of the videos, the evaluation of popularity should also account for the numbers of 'likes' and 'dislikes' every video receives. The two previously mentioned Swedish videos were also the most popular ones in terms of likes: 'Like a Swede' had 2,770 likes and 197 dislikes, while 'Business like a Swede' received 2,102 likes and 467 dislikes. A minute-long video posted by Deutsche Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB), the German Trade Union Confederation, which calls for

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3BEGzeGJOSk>
 8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thso9o0ZnYM>

higher pensions has been viewed about 311,000 times. This video received 641 likes, but also 1,144 dislikes. Therefore, even if negative attention is sometimes seen as important as positive attention, these numbers demonstrate that one should be careful in defining the popularity of the videos only by the number of likes.

One way to better understand the reasons behind the expression of likes or dislikes is by reading the comments, but only eight per cent of the videos in our sample have received any comments. The number is much lower than that of other social movements like Occupy Wall Street (Vraga *et al.* 2014). Relying on comments is also problematic since the owner of the YouTube account can remove comments, and our interviews conducted with Swedish union confederations indicate that they regularly remove comments with racist or sexist messages.

Two types of YouTube videos

If we look at the content of the videos which seem to be popular (videos with many views and likes and only a few dislikes), we can distinguish between two types: videos that mobilise for protest actions, and videos that inform the audience about issues important to unions and their activities, such as wages or working environments.

The first type of video concerning political activism and protest actions seems to be popular across all countries. For example, there is a video uploaded by the Greek union Panergatiko Agonistiko Metopo (All Workers Militant Front) in cooperation with the Greek Communist Party that mobilised for a political strike against the government on 17 May 2017 (433 likes and 87 dislikes, out of 55,135 views).⁹ Similarly, the Spanish Unión General de Trabajadores (General Workers Union) posted a video calling for a strike on 29 March 2012 (396 likes and 68 dislikes, out of 56,956 views).

The second type of video focuses on informing the audience about how unions work and how they defend employees' rights. The aforementioned examples of popular videos from Italy, Spain and Sweden fall into this category, but also the German DGB's video 'Was haben die Gewerkschaften je für uns getan?' ('What have unions ever done for us?') with 412 likes and 22 dislikes out of 103,500 views.¹⁰

In sum, the analysed metadata provides us with a general indication that union confederations in Europe do use YouTube videos and the most popular ones are those which are professionally produced or concern political campaigns. However, union videos are obviously not as widely disseminated as the most common YouTube content such as music videos or gaming. While videos in our sample have on average 1,100 views, the typical datasets used in YouTube research indicate an average of 10,000 views per video (Hoiles *et al.* 2017). Nevertheless, union videos are doing no worse, and sometimes even better, than other social movements. For instance, the average number of views in our sample is higher than for one of the videos uploaded by Occupy Wall Street (1,100 compared to 878) (Vraga *et al.* 2014).

Reaching out to new audiences

YouTube videos have the potential to support the engagement and mobilisation of existing members and to reach out to new audiences. YouTube can work as a means of revitalisation for trade unions and we argue that there are several good reasons for trade unions to use the platform in this way. Firstly, it facilitates the reaching of groups who are usually difficult to unionise, particularly young people (Vandaele 2018). It is widely known that young people use social media frequently and regularly, YouTube being no exception. For example, in Sweden almost everyone under 25 uses YouTube on a daily basis.¹¹ In addition to entertainment young people also use YouTube as a source of information and sometimes even as a search engine (Stiegler 2009). Therefore, it is not surprising that some studies already show that young people became aware of union campaigns through YouTube videos (Geelan 2015: 81-83). Additionally, as videos have the great advantage of not needing to carry any verbal message, it is possible to overcome language barriers so that people who do not (fluently) speak the dominant language of a country can also be reached. YouTube videos could thus simplify the transmission of union messages to non-native speakers. Finally, by addressing young people and producing videos that could be understood by non-native speakers, this would probably also benefit other underrepresented groups in unions, like workers on temporary or atypical contracts (young people and non-native speakers also being frequently employed on such non-standard contracts).

Our descriptive analysis below is based on 4,500 videos uploaded by Swedish trade unions in the period 2007 to 2016. We differentiate between unions affiliated to the three union confederations in Sweden: Landsorganisationen (LO, Swedish Trade Union Confederation), which organises manual workers, the aforementioned TCO, which organises white-collar workers, and Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation (Saco, Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations), which organises professionals.

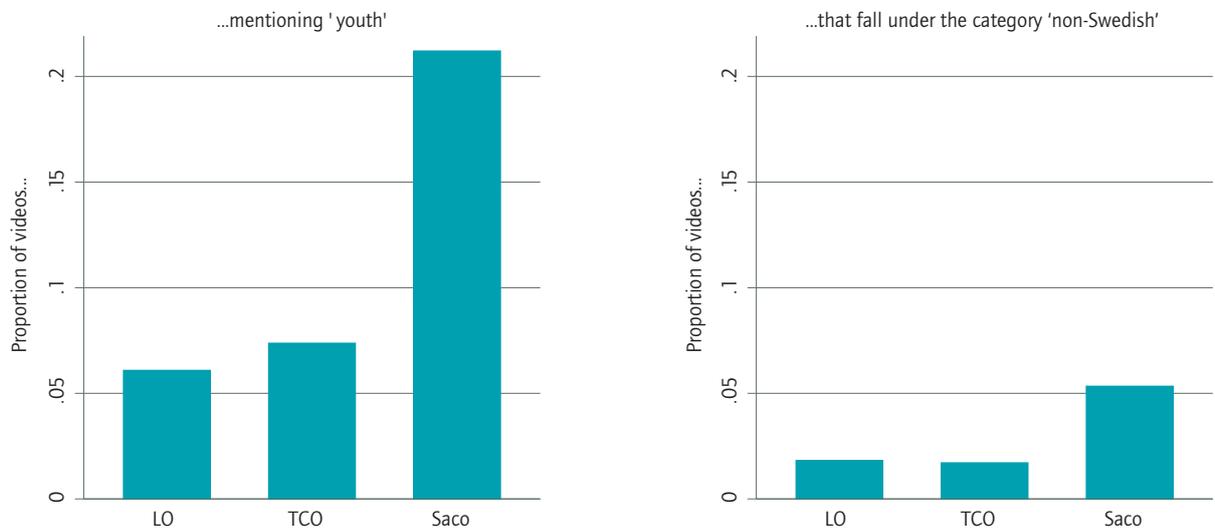
Similarly to the union confederations across Europe, many of the videos uploaded by the Swedish unions contain political messages, especially on electoral campaigning for parliamentary elections, and these videos are widely disseminated and popular. We assessed if unions actually address young people in their videos via a simple content analysis in which we have looked for words such as 'youth', 'young', 'student' and so on in the titles and descriptions of the videos. For detecting the videos addressing non-Swedish-speaking audiences we attempted to find videos in languages other than Swedish. Comparing the unions affiliated to the three union confederations highlighted some interesting differences. Saco-affiliated unions have produced the most videos targeting youth compared to unions affiliated to the other two confederations. We expected the opposite trend, as both the TCO unions and the LO unions have lost far more members in recent years than Saco (on the contrary, Saco has increased its membership in the past ten years) (Figure 3).

9 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoKel3H_vYU

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TfjHituJoMI>

11 Youtube och svenskarna i siffror (YouTube and the Swedes in numbers) by Pamela Davisson, <https://www.iis.se/blogg/youtube-och-svenskarna-i-siffror/>

Figure 3 Videos mentioning 'youth' and videos in languages other than Swedish, 2007-2016



Source: Jansson and Uba (2018).

This focus on youth among Saco-affiliated unions can be explained by the profile of their members. Most Saco affiliates are based in specific professions or occupations, and they can therefore easily identify and target potential members. Although LO affiliates that have suffered from membership decline do not seem to address young people in their videos, some of them have established separate youth organisations that have their own youth-specific YouTube channels. One example is the 'Young Electricians', although its videos are not very popular (1,100 views per video in average, in comparison to an average of 2,000 views for the whole sample). The most popular video targeting young people, in terms of the number of views (more than 40,000) and likes (26), is the TCO-affiliated union Unionen's video featuring a competition for students in which the prize was food for a whole month.

Regarding the targeting of immigrant workers, we looked at whether different unions are posting videos in languages other than Swedish. As Figure 3 shows, we found that only a few videos are posted in English, most of them posted by Saco and consisting of footage of seminars and conferences or communicating certain information in English. It even seems that Saco is using YouTube to archive recorded films from different events in which international actors took part. These videos do not target the 'immigrant worker', a category of workers that has been difficult to organise. Instead, they appear to have an educational purpose for already existing members, for instance, featuring medical researchers describing new surgical methods.

Despite having videos about their activities and basic labour rights, the other unions have even fewer than Saco in languages other than Swedish, which suggests that the Swedish unions are not directly targeting migrant labour or employees with immigrant backgrounds. Nevertheless, the use of other languages on their websites shows that they are aware of the language issue.

Finally, the total number of videos referring to workers with atypical employment contracts is very small (it is rarely mentioned and therefore not shown in Figure 3). Although the total number of these videos is very small, these issues are mentioned more frequently by the unions affiliated to the LO than to the TCO and Saco. Many of these videos also carry a political message against the precarious status of many employees in, for instance, the retail sector. This also follows our expectations: atypical employment contracts constitute a far more common problem for the LO affiliates than for the other Swedish unions.

Conclusion

Trade unions are facing many challenges today and membership decline is undoubtedly one of the most serious ones. Using social media is far from being the only solution to these challenges, but if used efficiently it could serve as a means to engage and mobilise existing members, to reach out to potential members and to raise awareness among the public about unions and what they stand for. Currently, based on our analysis of trade union confederations, many uploaded videos are 'inward-looking': they predominantly seem to target existing members (for instance, videos from congresses, meetings and so on) rather than to attract non-members. Informing members is certainly an important task, but it does not help to draw in those who are not already familiar with trade unions. In the context of information overload on the internet it is hard to get attention, and compared to entertainment videos, trade unions' YouTube channels have relatively few viewers (which is of course understandable considering the nature of most of the videos).

From the few videos in our sample that went viral, such as 'Like a Swede', we can learn that professional and costly productions have an effect. However, while such videos draw attention to unions, it is unclear if the audience became more willing to join a

union. Given this uncertainty, these kind of productions might be too financially risky for unions. Other, less costly videos carrying political messages were also popular and have the potential to engage existing members and to reach out to possible new ones. YouTube in particular, as a much-used medium or platform by young people, provides unions with the opportunity to reach out to younger generations. Whether the style of the existing union YouTube videos is appealing to young people is not analysed here, therefore remaining an open question. The most straightforward way for unions to achieve this is by engaging young people, unions members or not, in the production of such videos. Considering the contemporary importance of accurate metadata for the use of search engines and the fact that young people seek out information in the format of videos, unions should also consider adding more informative tags, titles and descriptions to their videos. This would optimise search results and lead to a more effective dissemination. Finally, and needless to say, the use of YouTube should be combined with that of other social media channels.

References

- Barber S. (2015) Using film as a source, Manchester, Manchester University Press.
- Geelan T. (2015) Danish trade unions and young people: using media in the battle for hearts and minds, in Hodder A. and Kretsos L. (eds.) Young workers and trade unions: a global view, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 71-89.
- Hoiles W., Aprem A. and Krishnamurthy V. (2017) Engagement and popularity dynamics of YouTube videos and sensitivity to meta-data, IEEE Transactions on Knowledge and Data Engineering, 29 (7), 1426-1437.
- Jansson J. and Uba K. (2018) Trade unions on YouTube: revitalization in Sweden, Basingstoke, Palgrave Pivot (forthcoming).
- Khan M.L. (2017) Social media engagement: what motivates user participation and consumption on YouTube?, Computers in Human Behavior, 66, 236-247.
- Panagiotopoulos P. and Barnett J. (2015) Social media in union communications: an international study with UNI Global Union affiliates, British Journal of Industrial Relations, 53 (3), 508-532.
- Stiegler B. (2009) The carnival of the new screen : from hegemony to isonomy, in Snickars P. and Vonderau (eds.) The YouTube reader, Stockholm, National Library of Sweden, 40-59.
- Upchurch M. and Grassman R. (2015) Striking with social media: the contested (online) terrain of workplace conflict, Organization, 23 (5), 639-656.
- Vandaele K. (2018) How can trade unions connect with young workers?, in O'Reilly J., Leschke J., Ortlieb R., Seeleib-Kaiser M. and Villa P. (eds.) Youth labor in transition: inequalities, mobility, policies in Europe, New York, Oxford University Press (forthcoming).
- Vraga E.K., Bode L., Wells C., Driscoll K. and Thorson K. (2014) The rules of engagement: comparing two social protest movements on YouTube, Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 17 (3), 133-140.
- Wring D. (2005) The politics of marketing the Labour party, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

ETUI publications are published to elicit comment and to encourage debate. The views expressed are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily represent the views of the ETUI nor those of the members of its general assembly.

The *ETUI Policy Brief* series is edited jointly by Jan Drahokoupil, Philippe Pochet, Aída Ponce Del Castillo, Sotiria Theodoropoulou, Kurt Vandaele and Sigurt Vitols.

The editor responsible for this issue is Kurt Vandaele, kvandaele@etui.org

This electronic publication, as well as previous issues of the *ETUI Policy Briefs*, is available at www.etui.org/publications. You may find further information on the ETUI at www.etui.org.

© ETUI aisbl, Brussels, June 2018

All rights reserved. ISSN 2031-8782



The ETUI is financially supported by the European Union.

The European Union is not responsible for any use made of the information contained in this publication.