

**New Technology and a Labour Media Strategy**  
**Some Canadian Experiences**

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The opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

## Introduction

As a nation, Canada ranks ninth out of 30 OECD countries when it comes to broadband access, with 22.4 subscribers per 100 inhabitants. That should be good news for a labour movement that is trying to reach out for new — and especially younger — members. But it's a movement that is still in transition from old technologies to new and is probably having its greatest success in improving communication to and among activists.

This paper is based on conversations with a selection of union communications staff and individuals who work independently as well my own experiences. I approach the subject as someone whose hands-on relationship with communications technology — whether phototypesetting, desktop publishing or radio production — started to wane more than a decade ago. I missed the technology boat as internet use expanded and do not know how to design a web site and make it work, although I know who to ask. My approach is also framed by my own internet use — outside of work hours — as a rural dweller who only has dial-up service.

I worried about that lack of hands-on experience when I started to work on this paper. But now I don't think it really matters. The significant issues that surround developing a labour media strategy are not tied to the technology. These are questions we have been addressing all along while trying to build an influential student press, a feminist news network, community-based alternative newspapers, progressive radio stations and programs — and ultimately being credible sources of news and analysis for and about working people.

It's that last point that I believe is most important. New technology is fantastic. We have the potential of reaching so many people. We can use colour in a newsletter that's being emailed or posted online! I can't believe how many videos I've been involved with in the last three years and how seldom I've thought about mailing costs.

We are reaching people in ways we've never done before, getting more immediate and relevant information into more hands; but, by the end of this paper I will be arguing that there is such a thing as too much transparency.

This paper takes a look at some Canadian union experiences with new technology. It is by no means exhaustive. Also, it does not cover the use of new technology by unions in Quebec; although, it should be noted that most national unions in Canada have both English- and French-language web sites. In some cases, the sites mirror each other; in others, they may have some different content.

Some of the most common and popular uses for web-based communications are:

- online actions
- messages from union leaders
- providing information about collective agreements, benefits, pensions
- conducting research and making it available

- email lists and newsletters
- distance education.

Less common uses included video news, podcasts and blogs although there is increasing movement in that direction. Unions, centrally and locally, are also using DVDs to get information to members and, in some cases, to media.

## **Union density and access to the internet**

Just over 30% of the Canadian workforce — almost 4.4 million people — belong to unions. More than three-quarters of the public sector is unionized, compared with 19.9% in the private sector.

Out of 845 unions with more than 16,000 locals recorded in 2005<sup>1</sup>, the top five by size were:

Canadian Union of Public Employees (cupe.ca)	550,000
National Union of Public and General Employees (nupge.ca)	337,000
United Steelworkers of America (steelworkers.ca)	280,000
Canadian Auto Workers (caw.ca)	265,000
United Food & Commercial Workers (ufcw.ca)	230,000

Like the general population, union members have pretty good access to the internet, either at work or at home. In a 2005 membership survey, CUPE found that 88% of its members have access. Forty per cent wanted to receive email from the union; the rest preferred personal contact with a steward or other union official.

It's not surprising that the majority of members in a public sector union would have access to the internet and email both at work as well as home; however the same seems to hold true for many industrial workplaces. For the last 10 years, Gord Lechner has run the web site for CAW Local 2301, representing aluminum smelter workers in Kitimat, British Columbia. He says virtually all members have a company email address with computer access — in the lunchroom among other places — because the employer uses the technology to post work notices and the like.

The local piggybacks on the employer's system, which we might assume limits the type of communication the union can carry on. Many employers are becoming stricter about the use of email at the work site. Even more importantly, a local can lose contact with its members during labour strife if they do not have separate, non-work email addresses to use.

While we often make the link from new technology to younger workers, Lechner also notes that retirees from his local "love" to get the newsletter by email.

In some workplaces, office workers may have access while those in the plant or, as a public sector example, municipal outside workers do not. The local risks dissent if it

relies too much on email or a web site as its main communication tool since part of the membership is left out of the loop.

There's also the potential for losing the face-to-face connection that contributes so much to solidarity if we rely too much on electronic communication. You can chat in the lunchroom over a magazine or pamphlet. As Andrea Calver of UNITE HERE! Canada ([unitehere.ca](http://unitehere.ca)) says, "Nothing substitutes for going into a hotel and talking to the members."

To make sure they are reaching everyone, many unions produce the same material in different formats. Indeed, Peter Birt, communications manager for the Ontario Nurses Association ([ona.org](http://ona.org); [stillnotenoughnurses.ca](http://stillnotenoughnurses.ca)), predicts we'll still be doing old and new technology for decades to come.

"We're miles away from ever giving up print," he says, noting at the same time that all new technologies get you broader reach, whether it's to the leadership or rank and file. But that reach is also defined by the users, who may be limited to dial-up internet access, older equipment or lack of knowledge. Most union web sites avoid use of Flash or live streaming for those reasons; communicators note that they are left to struggle with making content interesting without those tools.

Yet, Frank Saptel from the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers ([iamaw.ca](http://iamaw.ca)) echoes Birt: "By delivering the message more than one way, you increase your audience."

For paid union staff who are producing materials, new technology has often meant a considerable increase in workload because of the expectation that information will be available in several different formats. In some cases, especially at the local level, those choices will be based on the skill and knowledge level of the individual who happens to be in any given staff or leadership position. Training and access to equipment and software are issues for some union communicators and their support staff.

The result is communication based more on chance than strategy.

At the local level, there are issues of volunteer burnout. Gord Lechner provides web training workshops at the annual conferences of the Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM). He says: "I always get asked, 'when do you finish doing your web site?' The reality is a lot of sites become stagnant."

That said, a lot of what we're doing is working.

## **Online actions**

Everyone loves online actions and most union web sites have them. The actions are often directed to federal or provincial governments and may be generated by non-labour organizations that are allied to the labour movement.

Whether form emails have an influence on government is debatable. Frances Fitzgibbon, web editor for the Canadian Labour Congress ([canadianlabour.ca](http://canadianlabour.ca)), prefers a fax action centre because she feels emailing members of Parliament is like spamming. However, fax or email, most allow users to customize the message to their MP.

Online actions are easy for users who would otherwise put off sending a letter or making a phone call. They also help build the sense of a movement because most union sites link to same action page. It's worth taking a look at the success of some recent country-wide actions.

*Code Blue for Child Care — [buildchildcare.ca](http://buildchildcare.ca)*

This web site, hosted by CUPE for the Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada, has been a central clearing house for information and action for several years now. It has been used effectively to connect and expand an activist base that succeeded in putting child care on the agenda in the federal election last January.

The unfortunate outcome of that election was a minority Conservative government, which immediately announced its intention to scuttle a nascent national child care program and replace it with a taxable allowance of \$100 per month for each child age 6 or younger.

The web site itself had become somewhat stagnant in the pre-election period as the previous Liberal minority government was rolling out child care funding agreements with the provinces. Post-election, however, it rapidly revived, again as a clearinghouse for news and information for activists to use at the community level.

Previous online actions, such as sending letters to members of Parliament, helped build an email list that was used to alert people all over the country to an online petition/open letter to the Prime Minister calling on him to honour the previous government's funding agreements. More than 50,000 people signed as the link was passed around through email. At the same time, municipal councils, school boards, provincial legislatures and non-governmental organizations passed resolutions with the same demand.

The latest action in circulation asks people to send a new letter to their MP supporting a bill from the New Democratic Party that would legislate a pan-Canadian child care program. Most union sites in the country have a link to [buildchildcare.ca](http://buildchildcare.ca).

However, the reality is that all the online and email activity would make no difference if there was a Conservative majority government in place. Indeed, the progress that had already been made may not have happened if the previous Liberal government had been a majority, since it had been re-elected several times despite consistently breaking its promise to create a national child care program. It finally proceeded in order to shore up its base — which could easily have moved to other parties at the federal level, like the

NDP or Bloc Québécois, both supporters of a national program — when it found itself in a minority situation.

The web tools are excellent for expanding the activist network, for keeping it connected and for providing people with an easy way to take action. However, the tools alone don't win the fight; that takes wise strategic planning and work on the ground to keep the issue in the media spotlight, to convince political parties to include your position in their platforms and convince voters that it's an issue on which they should determine their vote.

### *Canadians for Equal Marriage — equal-marriage.ca*

This is another web-based campaign that revived after the January federal election. The Conservative Party had run on a platform promising to re-open the question of gay marriage and hold another vote in the House of Commons.

Derek Blackadder, a CUPE national representative and volunteer with LabourStart, says one of the things he liked about this campaign was the email updates sent out after the original fight had been won. Because the connection was maintained, he feels, supporters were ready to take up the cause again.

The Conservatives have already delayed the vote, appearing to be more willing to move on this issue than they are on child care. However, again there's a political reality. Two-thirds of Canadians are opposed to re-opening the question, including a slim majority of Conservative voters and a majority of those who say they *oppose* gay marriage.

### *Stop Scab Labour, Support Bill C-257*

Virtually every union affiliated to the Canadian Labour Congress has carried an online action asking members to contact their MPs to support this bill, which would outlaw scab labour during strikes at workplaces under federal jurisdiction (a relatively small number of workers). The emails and faxes are generated from the CLC site.

The Bloc Québécois bill passed the second reading stage in October with hundreds of messages sent by union members.

## **Strike support and other solidarity actions**

In CUPE, our standard practice for strike averting and strike support has been to use newspaper and radio advertising to encourage the public to phone, fax or email employers. Putting the message into an action form on the web site also gets the action publicized quickly within the union and makes it easy to carry out. District councils and local unions can put the action on their own web sites. It moves out easily to other unions and coalition partners.

There's good Canadian participation in LabourStart online actions, says Derek Blackadder. Many unions carry the LabourStart feed on their sites. Blackadder notes that a higher than normal proportion of Canadian email subscribers are not full-time union officers.

Canadian unions looking for support have also used LabourStart to promote their campaigns internationally. When 1,400 British Columbia hospital food service workers and cleaners were on strike against Sodexho for seven weeks in 2005, the Hospital Employees Union (CUPE) made contact with several European unions that also represent Sodexho workers. At their suggestion, HEU launched a LabourStart solidarity support campaign that generated 2,500 emails from around the globe directed to the Paris-based CEO of Sodexho.

Communications director Mike Old says that while it's difficult to assess how effective it was in getting Sodexho to settle, it was hugely inspiring for the workers.

Brian Blakeley is a CUPE servicing representative who also runs chenuke.com and issues the twice-weekly Labour News Headlines Digest by email. He used cheblogs.com to set up a web site for a 2003 strike against Aramark by food service workers at Trent University. Because it was a strike in a web-savvy university community, the union had immediate access to people who influence decisions, he says. The attention the site drew affected the outcome of the strike, he believes, adding that email is a very powerful tool in bargaining.

## **Email and mailing lists**

Early this year, CUPE Ontario was involved in a campaign about legislation governing pensions for municipal and school board employees that threatened to escalate into a province-wide strike by 100,000 members. In the last, frantic days, Blakeley used email to stay in touch with union staff reps and remind them to check the web site at regular intervals. He says: "You control the message completely and can get information to people quickly."

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union uses email often — but, they hope, not so often as to be spam — to communicate directly with individual members. Their email lists covers about one-quarter of their 26,000 members.

"Members depend on their email," says Randy Robinson. "People now expect they're going to receive updates by email when we're in bargaining. As long as we can get the message into every workplace, they can pass it on to co-workers."

Most of the communicators who contributed ideas to this paper stressed the need for regular but not frequent email. Too often, and the unsubscribe messages start flooding in. Ultimately, though, it's all about building lists, organizing lists and targeting messages.

Members and staff can also communicate directly among themselves through mailing lists or listserves. CUPE hosts about 100 different lists, providing space for the union's jurisdictions, research areas, workers compensation advocates, individual locals and social justice groups from outside the union, among others. It also offers free web site hosting for locals, including training and design templates, and free webmail for members.

## **Democracy and member involvement**

CUPE has also been near to unique among Canadian unions in having allowed comments on articles on its web site for some years until that option was closed off. Needless to say, much debate has ensued as it was tried again and then stopped again. There is much to say on both sides of the argument about whether a union web site should be a forum open to unfettered, democratic debate or be a house organ promoting the union (and some would say, the leadership). But it's fair to say most people agreed that problems arose with abusive language and misinformation and that managing both takes time and effort.

If we lived in a society where mass media reported on labour and working peoples' concerns just like they do on business, government and consumerism, I might not have a problem with open comments. But we don't. Our own media are the only means outside of paid advertising that we have to deliver an uncensored message to our members and our allies. Our media are the ones that reflect the members back to themselves. OPSEU's Randy Robinson remarks that of all the things on the union web site, the most popular is the area where locals can post photos. The members like to see each other.

What is the sense in using those media to attack the leaders the members have elected, to run down the decisions made by their union and to let the whole world read all about it? We have daily newspapers in every city in the country ready to do that.

That isn't to say there is no room to use new technology to improve union democracy. For example, members who are not able to attend CUPE's biannual convention can listen to it live on the web site or read a real-time ticker tape highlighting debate as it happens on the floor. Unions are using mass dialing technology to get members out to meetings so they can voice their views and vote on action. Locals are sending DVDs to individual members so they can see and hear what their union is doing.

Sites like cheblogs.com and open source software provide groups of members or individuals the opportunity to use blogging to make their views known and to organize. In order to encourage interactivity, there may be some merit in a union creating a site outside of the "official" web site where members can exchange information, comments, photos and more, such as CUPE offers to locals. But unless we make greater progress than we have to date in drawing large numbers of the membership to our media in any of the various forms, these too could become meeting places for existing groups of tech-savvy activists.

## **Independent progressive media**

To be credible — with both the membership and the public — unions need independent media to report on their activities and issues. Email and RSS both help us keep our names in front of mainstream reporters in the competition for print and airtime. We're seeing more use of sites like YouTube.com for posting video statements, actions and solidarity messages.

And, in addition to longstanding, labour-friendly media like *Our Times*, *Canadian Dimension* (now also podcasting), *Briarpatch* and *This* magazines, we have new web sites like rabble.ca, straightgoods.ca and theyee.ca. Just like the alternative newspapers of old, these sites provide a space for debate about labour and progressive movements. They also need the ongoing support of unions, both financial and with promotion among members.

## **Conclusion**

New technology is a constant wonder and provides really useful tools, even though it also seems to make the union communicator's workload ever heavier. New technology does not change the basics in an effective labour media strategy. No matter how we're doing it, we need to let members' voices speak about their work and their issues because they are most credible. We need to make sure members see and hear themselves as well as the leaders they have elected. And we need to reach out — build those lists — so we can keep them up to date and informed.

So, while our tools change, the reasons for our work and the internal and external relationships that shape it do not.

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<sup>1</sup> *Union Membership in Canada – January 1, 2005*, Marie-Ève Bédard, Workplace Information Directorate, Labour Program, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada