Towards a typology of trade unions uses of the Internet: Preliminary data on the Portuguese case

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Abstract:

In Anglo-Saxon literature, information and communication technologies (ICTs) are being discussed as an important contribution for union revitalization. Authors stress that ICTs are faster, cheaper, and further reaching than traditional means. Internet, for instance, can be used from domestic space for training purposes, reaching workers with time limitations and other constraints (Green and Kirton 2003). In fact, Internet seems to have an important impact on internal communication of trade unions, promoting access to more information, offering services to members, like e-learning, and stimulating discussion even among less confident members. But also in external communication, Internet helps to promote national and international solidarity, and to establish a better contact with mass media. In this sense, small trade unions, for instance, may be particularly empowered with ICTs (Greene *et al.* 2003).

These ICTs potentialities can only be developed if union strategy and users' profiles allow it. This mean that, first, ICTs can only be used in a creative and empowering way, enhancing participation, if union leaders want so (Diamond and Freeman 2002) and if their constituencies are capable to respond to the challenge (digital divide in the workforce). Since ICTs have the potential to de-burocratize (Lipset *et al.* 1956), union democracy can be strengthened if decentralization and accountability are assured (Fairbrother 2006) and if other obstacles, as for instance computer illiteracy or resistance of potential users to new forms of communication (Martinez Lucio 2003).

The aim of this paper is to present the preliminary data of a research on ICT contribution to inclusiveness and democratization of Portuguese trade unions. As observed in other countries, Portuguese union membership and density have declined (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2001) and unions seem to have difficulties in recruiting groups like younger people, temporary agency workers, migrants or employees in modern services. Since there is no information on Portuguese trade union use of the Internet, a first exploratory approach is necessary and we propose to analyse, with no sector restrain, to what extent, for which purposes and in which ways the more than 300 Portuguese trade unions use the Internet. We intend to gather and systematise information from Internet websites like: services offered (registration, forum discussion, e-learning, member personal data rectification, exclusive service area for members, etc.), documents available, graphical presentation, etc. In order to proceed to an in-depth

analyse in a following phase, we will develop a typology of the trade unions' use of the Internet that will be useful namely for the later selection of case studies.

In short, this paper will contribute to cover the lack of knowledge of Portuguese trade unions' communication strategies and to know how they are using ICT and Internet in particular in order to deal with new and old challenges, namely to make union democracy more inclusive and to enter new forms of collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the investment in the Internet infrastructure, Portugal is still integrated in the group of the European countries in which Internet is less used by citizens. In fact, according to the Eurobarometer (2008), Portugal is the 4th EU27 country where citizens have used less the Internet in the past three months. This contrasts with an intense use of cellular phones in the country. Portugal is the 11th country among EU27 with more mobile phone users and the 4th where citizens use them several times a day.

In the year in which the European Commission promotes the *"i2010 - A European Information Society for Growth and Employment"*, a new strategy named the *Digital Agenda*[1], we intend to evaluate how Portuguese trade unions are performing in this matter.

This paper is part of an on-going research, which intends to understand how information and communication technologies (ICTs) contribute to inclusiveness and democratization in the trade union movement. An exploratory approach is necessary since there is no research on the Portuguese trade unions information and communication strategies and in particular on their use of ICTs. So, the aim of this paper is to analyse to what extent, for which purposes and in which ways the more than 300 existing Portuguese trade unions use the Internet and to propose a preliminary typology of trade unions' website contents.

It is not our intention to make reference to the online rhetoric or to the information and persuasion questions (Serra and Canavilhas 2009). Instead of that, we intend to look to the content of the union's websites.

The paper begins by presenting a briefly review of the literature on trade unions' use of the Internet and on previous proposals of websites' content analysis. After, we will discuss the Portuguese trade unions use of the Internet and finally we will present the analytical dimensions that shall structure a proposal of a typology on unions' use of the Internet.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF ICTS ON TRADE UNIONS' ACTION

Some authors stress that ICTs are an important contribution for union revitalization, since it has an important impact on trade unions internal and external communication. They emphasise that ICTs are faster, cheaper, and further reaching than traditional means. Internet, for instance, can be used from domestic space for training purposes, reaching workers with time limitations and other constraints (Green and Kirton 2003).

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[1] On the *Digital Agenda* see http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/index_en.htm.

In fact, it is argued that Internet have an important impact on the internal communication of the trade unions, promoting access to more information, offering services to members, like e-learning, and stimulating the debate even among less confident members. Also in external communication, Internet helps to promote national and international solidarity, and to establish a better contact with mass media. In this sense, small trade unions, for instance, may be particularly empowered with ICTs (Greene *et al.* 2003).

But the dissemination of ICTs has several obstacles. A first one is internal to the unions. In fact, ICTs can only be used in a creative and empowering way, enhancing participation, if union leaders want so (Diamond and Freeman 2002). Since ICTs have the potential to de-burocratize (Lipset *et al.* 1956), union democracy can be strengthened, but this will only take place if decentralization and accountability are assured (Fairbrother 2006). Secondly, users' profiles may turn the effort inefficient since there may be computer illiteracy and resistance to new forms of communication among the workers (Martinez Lucio 2003).

2. THE USES OF THE INTERNET

In the beginning of the 2000s, Ward and Lusoli (2002) suggested a typology of the trade unions' uses of the Internet inspired on a previous paper from Gibson and Ward. This typology contains four main categories: *information provision*, which includes the reference to updating; *participation and interactivity*, from email provision until recruitment online; *networking*, specially the importance of the links to other websites; and *services provision*, this means commercial services or just the information of services provided by unions. Table 1 summarizes this proposal.

Table 1:
Trade unions content analysis of websites

a)	Information
b)	Participation
c)	Networking
d)	Services

Source: adapted from Ward and Lusoli 2002.

In our point of view, this trade unions content analysis of websites has some limitations. First of all, it duplicates categories from the same content nature, like information and services. Besides that, it seems to underestimate the potential of the Internet participation, giving little importance to interactivity. In this sense, it does not seem to fit on the analytical directives of the paper. Finally, it neglects formal aspects like multimedia supports.

This proposal was later adapted by Richard D. Freeman (2005) in his comparison of the UK and US trade unions. This author has simplified the previous classification, using only three categories: *information*, *participation* and *benefits*. Freeman has used this proposal briefly but he concludes that changes will profoundly affect union membership and density.

In Portugal, although the neglect in the study of unions' uses of the Internet, the use of this tool by other organizations is more accurate and it has been done in distinct fields and in different ways, from public services and newspapers surveys until market studies (UNICRE/ Vector 21 2005; Santos *et al.* 2005; Neto 2006).

Authors focused on cyberjournalism, for instance, adopt Mark Deuze (2003) proposal (Neto 2006), sustaining that the key characteristics of online publishing are *hypertextuality* (connection of resources), *interactivity* (options for public response or interact) and *multimediately* (media formats). In this sense, Deuze typology on online journalism is parameterised by, on one hand, a moderated or immoderate participatory communication axe, and, on the other hand, the concentration on public connectivity or on editorial content.

This typology neglects the quantity and quality of the information itself and gives few attention to conditions offered to users in their access to Internet.

If we look on market studies, we find criteria that combine the website content and layout with other formal factors. This is the cases of one study on the municipalities' websites (Santos *et al.* 2005) and of another on universities (Serra e Canavilhas 2009), which consider the accessibility, that is the easiness for disabled people in particular to access the websites, as well as the services provided and other factors.

A classification on the maturity of the information website content, originally developed by the *eEurope Program - An Information Society for All*, from 2005, is focused on the information provided for citizens and firms by the websites of the public administration services. This proposal identifies four levels of website content as presented in the following table.

Table 2:
eEurope development levels of website content

Levels	Description
1	Transactions
2	Online processes consultation or online forms available
3	Information on services provided and forms download
4	General information on activities

Source: adapted from Santos *et al* 2005.

Level 1 is named *transactions* and corresponds to the maximum of maturity. It means that there are procedures which exempt broadsheet documents, eventually including payments. Level 2 covers *online consultations of processes and forms to be submitted online*. Level 3 includes the *provision of forms* to be submitted in broadsheet to services. Finally, level 4, the lowest level of Internet content development, translates the attempt to establish an Internet presence through *general information*.

In sum, although the limitations of these proposals and despite they are addressed to different organizations, they both consider the information and interactivity dimensions. These contributions are important for our own research. In fact we will recover the information and interactivity dimension.

3. PORTUGUESE TRADE UNIONS' USES OF THE INTERNET

There are no known studies on Portuguese trade unions' uses of the Internet, despite the importance of this tool, as it is recognized namely in a master dissertation focused on a union confederation communication strategy with regard to the debate on the Labour Code (Rosa 2005).

In Portugal, a first obstacle that such a study faces is the lack of reliable data on the number of trade unions in activity. The main problem is that official data considers that many unions still exist because they have not informed the Labour Ministry of their dissolution, as it is stated by law. To avoid this problem, we have used the data of a recent PhD dissertation that is more reliable (Alves 2009).

For the purposes of this paper, we did not analyse in depth the federations' or confederations' websites. However, we can say that the website of the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (*Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses – Intersindical Nacional – CGTP-IN)*, the most representative Portuguese trade union confederation with 537000 members in 2006, what means 63% of the total membership (EIRO, 2009), and of the second more important trade union confederation, the General Workers' Union (*União Geral de Trabalhadores – UGT)*, with 210000 members in the same year, what means 24% of the total membership, have much information and multimedia supports, like videos. UGT has inclusively beneficiated from European funds for renewing its website.[2] The third confederation in importance, the Union of Independent Trade Unions (*União dos Sindicatos Independentes – USI)*, with 15000 members in 2006 accordingly to the same source, uses also multimedia supports and gives some information about its activities. Finally, the fourth confederation, the General Confederation of Independent Trade Unions *(Confederação Geral dos Sindicatos Independentes – CGSI)*, with only 5000 members has a very basic website with few information and no multimedia solutions[3].

The next table presents the number of Portuguese trade union organizations and the number of those with websites.

Table 3:
Number of Portuguese trade unions organizations (2009)

	Total	With website
Confederations	7	5
Federations	24	8
Trade unions	321	182

Source: Alves (2009)

We have identified 182 Portuguese trade unions with their own website, excluding from this number those unions which websites do not work at the moment. These 182 organisations represent about 57% of all Portuguese trade unions. However, we believe that the number of trade unions with access to the Internet is larger as we have identified some with an email address.

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[2] Some trade unions announce with the respective logo that they have beneficiated from public funds to support the improvement of their websites. This is the case of one union in the ports, the *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores do Porto de Aveiro – STPA*, which has beneficiated from the national program for the information society *(Programa Operacional da Sociedade da Informação – POSI)*.

[3] There are three other confederations registered in the Labour Ministry: two for technical and staff workers (one of them affiliates only unions that are affiliated to CGTP-IN, although the other is affiliated to UGT) and another that affiliates some of the unions in the ports and in the sea and coastal water transport . According to EIRO (2009), those trade unions that are not affiliated to any of the four Portuguese confederations mentioned above represented 87000 workers in 2006 (10% of the total membership).

Besides that, we have found a very restricted number of trade unions that have a blog instead of a website. Some others have a blog in the website, that is the case of the union of economic and food security authority workers (*Associação Sindical dos Funcionários da Autoridade de Segurança Alimentar e Económica – ASF-ASAE*). Although, we have observed that a blog does not necessary means a participated platform. The same happens with the forum solution; as we found in a teachers' union website, the one of the *Sindicato dos Professores do Norte – SPN*.

Considering the formal affiliation of the 182 trade unions in national confederations, we observe that the majority of unions, in all Portuguese confederations as well as among the non-affiliated unions[4], have a website. Nevertheless, there are important differences that we must emphasize. In fact, the data tell us that in CGSI and USI (70%) and in UGT (66%) the proportion of unions with a website is higher. On the contrary, we find the lower rate among the non-affiliated (54%) and in CGTP-IN (53%). Figure 1 presents this data.

Figure 1

[…]

These results analysis must take in account the social composition of unions membership, or users profile as stressed by literature. In fact, the majority of CGTP-IN unions belong to the manufacturing; electricity, gas and water supply, transports and construction branches. On the other side, UGT and CGSI and USI unions belong mainly to the services sector (including public administration), or are unions of technical and staff workers, or of clerical workers in the manufacturing, electricity supply or construction branches.

Between 1975 and 1978, the majority of Portuguese trade unions are from mining, manufacturing, electricity, gas and water supply and construction. In 1979, a fundamental shift occurs, since the majority of unions begins to come from services. In 2005, the unions in public administration, education and health reached more than one hundred units and since 2007, they are more than a third of the total population of unions. So, it is not surprising that the majority of unions with websites come from the services sector, as we can see in Figure 2.

Figure 2

[…]

The proportion of unions with a website is very different from sector to sector. In agriculture and fishing, only a union have a website (13%), while in the manufacturing there are 38% of unions, a figure that is almost a half of services (65%). A possible explanation for this situation is again the social composition of membership.

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[4] In Portugal there are some trade unions that are not affiliated to the peak organizations but are closed to them, and their number is relevant. In fact, there are 24 organizations that are not affiliated directly to CGTP-IN, but cooperate with it in a regular basis (attending its congresses, or taking part in coalitions led by CGTP-IN unions, like the one that exists in the public administration for bargaining purposes). The same occurs with UGT, where 14 organizations are indirectly affiliated to this confederation by their affiliation in two branch federations. For the purposes of this paper, we consider these 38 trade unions as non- affiliated.

4. TOWARDS THE CONSTRUCTION OF A TYPOLOGY ON TRADE UNIONS' USES OF THE INTERNET

We have made a preliminary analysis of trade unions websites, starting by the two dimensions already identified in other proposals. Later we will add a third dimension, which regroups innovative aspects that have been left behind by the literature.

4.1. Information dimension

The information content that we can observe in websites is quite diverse. But we may say that sometimes the information available does not correspond to what is announced.

Some websites are just a webpage. They are restricted to the presentation of the name and postal address of the trade union, a kind of showcase. This is the case of the union of the clerical workers in the prison service *(Associação Sindical dos Trabalhadores dos Serviços Prisionais – ASTSP)*. In these circumstances, we can state we are facing to a *basic level* of information (Picture 1).

Picture 1:
Information dimension - Basic level

[…]

Other websites are more informative, namely referring to services provided by unions, the union's officers in post, the announcement of trade union meetings, press releases, information on trade union history, on collective bargaining agreements, strikes' announcements, affiliation information, etc.

Still concerning the information dimension, we have noticed that few trade unions have an archive of news. An example is the trade union of the local authorities' workers, the *Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores da Administração Local – STAL*, which provides news since 2003. Also few trade unions have an English version of the website. This is the case of the air traffic controllers' trade union, the *Sindicato dos Controladores de Tráfego Aéreo - SINCTA*, probably due to the internationalization of the occupation. This website is common to the trade union and to the professional association, and it also shows the number of users online, the number of visits per day, besides other statistics. The railway workers trade union affiliated to CGTP-IN, the *Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores do Sector Ferroviário – SNTSF*, also provides translation to several languages using the Google translator. So, this second level of information is centered on the *organization* activity and services and may take advantage from the Internet potentialities if combined with different supports for instance.

Finally, the information dimension may focus on other subjects beyond the trade union activity, like news, job announcements, useful links, advertisements sponsoring the website, etc. This may be a signal that the website may be used as a source of information beyond the trade union activity, even with a sociability function. As an example, we may refer the website of the football players' union *(Sindicato dos Jogadores Profissionais de Futebol – SJPF)*, that presents news from other sources (Picture 2).

Picture 2:
Information dimension – Advanced level

[…]

In conclusion in websites we may find at least three levels of information: the *basic one*, the *organizational centred* and the *advanced*.

4.2.   Interactivity dimension

A second dimension is focused on the interactivity potential of the Internet. Once again, the effectiveness of some functions could not always be verified in a preliminary analysis, namely on the exclusive member services.

In this dimension, a first level corresponds to a *unilateral* website situation. The communication is one-sided in a monological mood. We can divide it in two levels: the *monological basic* and the *monological advanced*.

The *monological basic* is characterized by the fact that in the website only exist a postal or an email address to be used on an eventual contact.

In his turn, the *monological advanced* website includes a form to be fulfilled online for suggestions, questions, update personal details, etc. An important number of Portuguese trade unions offer the union registration possibility, usually through an attached document or through the download of a form to be fulfilled and sent to the trade union headquarters, but some also provide a form online. In this dimension level we also find surveys, namely on a labour issue, on the national budget, and often on the website layout. We can also consider here the situation of websites that have the possibility for a members' private access, mostly without presenting the information you may get. A teachers union, the *Sindicato Democrático dos Professores do Sul – SDPS*, provides the access to a union email, a possibility that is not much spread.

The *dialogical website* is characterized by the effective possibility of the interactivity in the communication. As an example, we may refer the website of the criminal investigators union *(Associação Sindical dos Funcionários de Investigação Criminal - ASFIC/PJ)*, that provides a forum of discussion (Picture 3).

Picture 3:
Interactivity dimension – Dialogical website

[…]

In conclusion, our second dimension has three levels: *monological basic*, *monological advanced* and *dialogical*.

4.3. Formal dimension

Considering the formal aspects, we may distinguish two different levels, a *simple* one and an *innovative* one.

In the first case, the websites do not make use of neither multimedia effects nor special solutions for disabled people. Few trade unions websites have sound, but when it happens the sound has usually only a decorative function.

On the second level of this formal dimension, the websites are more than a simple graphic presentation and consider the user-friendly aspect. They include videos, sound and other innovative solutions, like Feeds or RSS (Really Simple Syndication). This is the case of the website of the *Sindicato dos Enfermeiros Portugueses – SEP*, a nurses' union (Picture 4).

Picture 4:
Formal dimension – Innovative level

[…]

This higher level seems to be present in the websites of a few Portuguese trade unions. For instance, only the clerical workers union in the notary service (*Associação Sindical dos Oficiais dos Registos e Notariado – ASOR)*, has an *e-learning* platform (Picture 5). According to ASOR this platform, which was launched in 2005, is a success.

Picture 5:
Formal dimension – innovative level

[…]

Other innovative solutions are also rare. The *Sindicato dos Enfermeiros Portugueses - SEP*, and one of the judicial officers unions, the *Sindicato dos Oficiais de Justiça – SOJ*, announce they are present in Facebook. One of the Madeira's teachers unions, the *Sindicato dos Professores da Madeira – SPM*, announces a Skype identification. All these unions seem to show an Internet use that goes beyond the website. Also, another teachers union, the *Sindicato Nacional dos Professores Licenciados pelos Politécnicos e Universidades – SPLIU*, has a special service which allows members to receive a SMS with information from the union, the *SPLIU-SMS*. A union in the financial branch, the *Sindicato dos Bancários do Sul e Ilhas – SBSI*, which has a medical service, announces the scheduling of medical appointments by Internet.

The three dimensions that we have retained (information, interactivity and formal aspects) are summarized in the next table.

Table 5:
Dimensions of a typology on trade unions website

DIMENSIONS	LEVELS
A) Information dimension	1. basic
	2. organizational centred
	3. advanced
B) Interactivity dimension	1. monological basic
	2. monological advanced
	3. dialogical
C) Formal dimension	1. simple
	2. innovative

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Mainly in the Anglo-Saxon countries there is an important debate on the use of ICTs, and in particular of the Internet, by unions. Some authors are very optimistic, sustaining that ICTs can contribute to unions' democratisation and to revert membership decline.

In Portugal, despite the increase of the investment in the *information society*, there is a lack of knowledge on the Portuguese trade unions information and communication strategies in general, and on the use of the Internet in particular.

The preliminary data of our research shows that more than a half of the Portuguese trade unions has a website, and that the services is the only sector where we have more unions with than without websites. Besides, the rate of unions with websites by sector is very different, so the proportion of unions with a website is higher among the CGSI+USI and UGT confederations than among CGTP-IN, the most important confederation.

Another relevant conclusion is that, apparently, Portuguese trade unions with a website are not giving a full use of the Internet possibilities, namely the interactivity and the multimedia solutions.

In this paper, we propose a preliminary typology that combines three dimensions: content, interactivity, and form. And in each dimension we consider hierarchical levels.

With the help of a homogeneity analysis, right after the classification of trade unions websites, we will be able to identify the main types of Portuguese trade unions use of the Internet and proceed to a more in depth analysis.

In the future, our research shall pursue also in order to understand users' profiles, to know where they have access to Internet and how they perceive it. Users' perspectives are important namely to evaluate unions' information and communication strategies in order to make them more effective and efficient.

Our research also intends to know the profile of the unions that do not have a website. This knowledge will inform us about who is being left behind.

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